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LIVERPOOL FC



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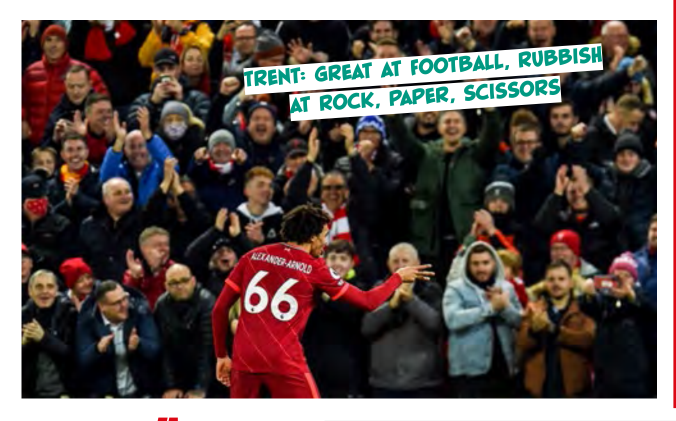
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KAIDE IN LIVERPOOL

The boss looks on as youngster Kaide Gordon works with the ball in a first-team session at the AXA Training Centre. The attacker scored his first senior goal at the Kop-end in the FA Cup tie against Shrewsbury Town, prompting matchday programme columnist Gary Gillespie to note: "You see certain players come through the youth teams and there are always one or two who stand out. He's one of them. Right from day one, when we saw him pre-season, he looked to have something about him. He is an exciting prospect."





TRENT: GREAT AT FOOTBALL, RUBBISH AT ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

CORNER TAKEN QUICKLY



Just like Barcelona in 2019, the page where you don't know what to expect...

5 LFC PRIME MINISTERS

Alex Oxlade-CHAMBERLAIN
Ian CALLAGHAN
Harry WILSON
Harvey BLAIR
Glen JOHNSON

OUR LADS HAVE COME FROM ALL OVER THE PLACE

Alisson Becker (Novo Hamburgo, Brazil)

Home to German immigrants in the 1820s, Novo Hamburgo means 'New Hamburg' in Portuguese. Probably for the best that it wasn't named after Moenchengladbach. The city was a sub-district of Sao Leopoldo until 1927 when state governor Borges de Medeiros signed a decree called the 'order of gold' to make Novo Hamburgo its own municipality.

Located in Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul, Novo Hamburgo is known as 'the Capital of Shoes' due to a long-standing tradition of footwear manufacturing. You could say it is a soleful city.

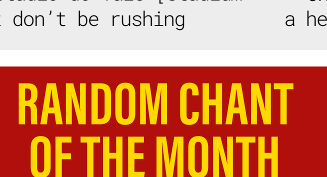
The local football team is called Esporte Clube Novo Hamburgo. Formed in 1911 by employees of a shoe factory, they play in a regional league in the 5,196-capacity Estadio do Vale [Stadium of the Valley] but don't be rushing to get one of their kits – they wear the same colours as Man City.

Former City and Internazionale right-back Maicon is also from Novo Hamburgo, a city which has two shopping malls, two TV stations and two goalkeepers. Fluminense goalie Muriel Becker was born there in 1987 and brother Alisson followed him in 1992.

Only one of them has ever scored a header against West Brom, though…

DON'T GRASS NECO WILLIAMS IN TO MONA BUT... •

"I managed to sneak a few chocolates in from my advent calendar."



RANDOM CHANT OF THE MONTH

Bring on yer Internazionale,
Bring on yer Roma by the score,
Barcelona, Real Madrid,
*Who the **** yer try'na kid,*
Cos Liverpool are the team that we adore!



X MARKS THE SPOT WHERE...HENDO HOPES TO GET ANOTHER EUROPEAN CUP TATTOO IN MAY

BLAGGING IT

One of these things happened in the recent Chelsea v Liverpool match, the other two didn't. Which one was it?

• Subs Tyler Morton and Owen Beck sat on the Chelsea bench by accident before kick-off.

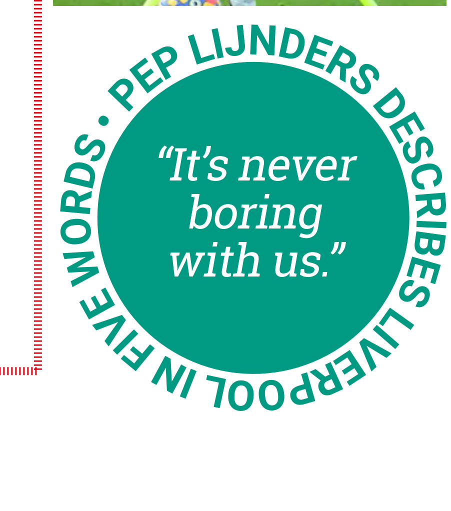
• Caoimhin Kelleher had the velcro on one of his goalie gloves ripped open by Antonio Rudiger before a set-piece.

• Kostas Tsimikas pulled one of Christian Pulisic's socks down before a corner.

Answer: Caoimhin Kelleher had to refasten one of his gloves after Chelsea defender Rudiger cheekily tugged at the velcro in an attempt to distract him. It didn't work and the other two things never happened.

LFC's original 1-to-11 Premier League squad numbers from 1993/94

1 Bruce Grobbelaar
2 Rob Jones
3 David Burrows
4 Steve Nicol
5 Mark Wright
6 Don Hutchison
7 Nigel Clough
8 Paul Stewart
9 Ian Rush
10 John Barnes
11 Mark Walters



PEP LIJNDERS DESCRIBES LIVERPOOL IN FIVE WORDS •

"It's never boring with us."

YEAR OF THE OX

Reds midfielder Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain on his personal Anfield odyssey and this team's determination to "stay in the fight"



Words: William Hughes



Four-and-a-half years into his Liverpool career, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain says that playing for Jürgen Klopp has helped take his game to a new level.

The midfielder has experienced extreme highs and lows during his time with the Reds, but he's never regretted the decision to leave Arsenal for Anfield soon after his 24th birthday in August 2017.

"It was for sure the hardest moment in my life up to that point," he recalls. "I'd been at Arsenal for seven seasons and I had to make a decision because I just felt like I needed to push on and develop.

"I wanted to play midfield and the season before I'd played as a wing-back. We started the next season and I was still playing wing-back. I knew I could do a good job there.

"For years at Arsenal I'd play in midfield a few times and have good games, but they had so many great midfielders and not a lot of lads that could play wing-back. I was quick, so I'd end up going out there.

"In the end it was a decision based on my development in the position that I wanted to push forward in. At that age, 24, it was time to make that hard choice and ultimately that's what I did."

In doing so, Oxlade-Chamberlain switched from working under one highly-respected coach in Arsene Wenger to another in Klopp, although he says they have different personalities.

"Jürgen is very different to Arsene. He's a lot louder and more animated. I knew that I was coming to a place where there are certain levels that are definitely expected – basic levels you have to hit and achieve to be a part of the team.

"There were no guarantees of 'you're coming in and you're playing'. It was more a case of 'this is what we're doing and this is how we're moving forward – we've got an exciting team that we're trying to build'.

"I sort of knew from watching Dortmund what kind of a character the boss is. I'd played against Dortmund a good few times and seen him on the touchline and saw how he spoke to the players and what he expected of them.

"Then you see how he is after games and how animated he gets and how happy he is with a good performance and how he interacts with the fans,

"You know from those aspects what you're getting into and that was a very different style of management and a different coach than I was used to.

"It was something new and exciting and Liverpool was somewhere where I thought I could develop and learn in a different way. I knew I was going to come and be pushed and push myself to achieve more – not necessarily in terms of goals and assists but with certain demands defensively.

"It was explained to me what I was going to have to do and this was how the team worked. I'd played against Liverpool enough times to know what it's like when you're on the back-foot at Anfield and everyone's pressing you and it seems like there's no way out.

"I'd seen how Jürgen had been with Liverpool the year before [2016/17] and the sort of performances that they were putting on – the demands and expectation and then, on top of that, you bring your skills to the game. I thought that would be exciting to be a part of."

As well as the physical strength required to play in Klopp's

midfield, Alex also needed incredible mental strength to bounce back from a traumatic injury against AS Roma in the Champions League semi-final of 2018.

An innocuous sliding challenge with defender Aleksandar Kolarov saw him tear his ACL, rupture his lateral collateral ligament, damage his medial ligament and tear his hamstring off the bone.

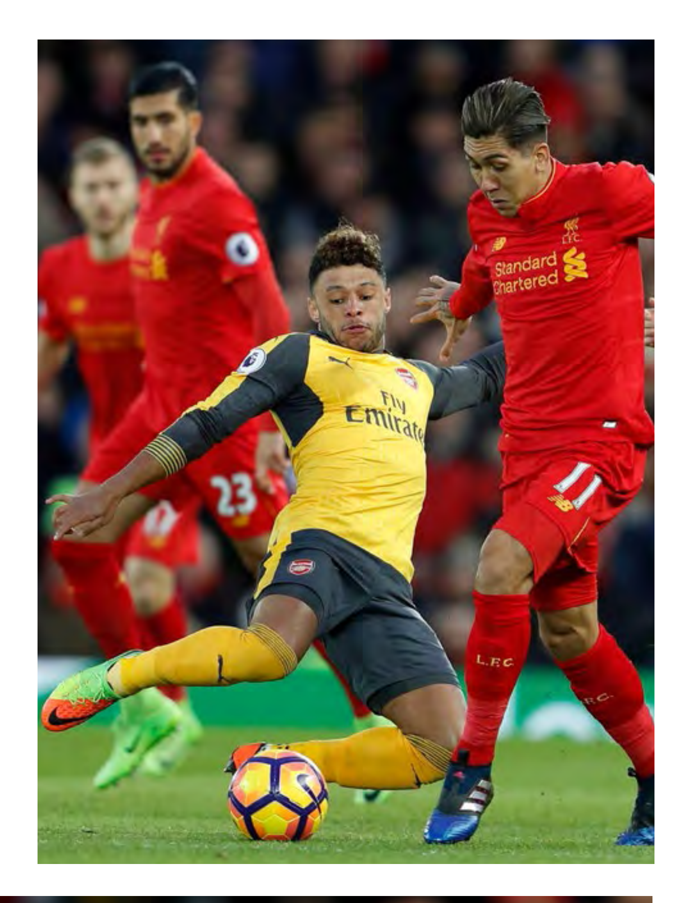
"There are times when you're back and in the swing of things again when you can look back at what you went through and how difficult that was," he reflects.

"It's the most difficult thing because as a footballer – at a big club especially – you're used to being a part of something that everyone's talking about. That's what you're there to do; to be applauded or criticised and judged and these are all things that you're used to dealing with every three days and it's fast-moving.

"The minute you get injured and it's a big injury where you know that you're out for a season, you're in and around that same environment and near the lads but you feel like the forgotten part. You're working in the background to get back to that point, but all of a sudden you can't contribute on the pitch.

"The other lads are still going and every three days travelling here and there, playing games, scoring, having great performances and results or maybe not, but they're still part of that same unit where they have to work on it, deal with it in training, figure out what's going on. And in the background you become, if not the forgotten man, being completely taken away from it.

"A massive thing when I got injured at Liverpool was the





I’d played against Liverpool enough times to know what it’s like when you’re on the back-foot at Anfield and everyone’s pressing you and it seems like there’s no way out

amount of support I had from the fanbase, not just in England but overseas. That does make a big difference.

"I remember being two or three months into the rehab when I got a big piece of origami with messages on it from a fan club in Japan. Just to realise that people are still willing you to keep working to get back was great.

"Little things like that help massively and I was really, really surprised at how amazing the support was throughout the whole time when I was injured. It gives you that extra push to get back."

He admits the toughest part of his road to recovery was the final stretch – "that last two to three months where I felt, 'now I'm good to go', but you can't. You've got to go through a whole pre-season, you've got to test it, to make sure you can kick, you can turn, you can stop, change direction properly.

"The last phase is when you do feel, 'I could be back here soon', but you know you need to respect [the fact that] you've had a massive injury and you need to give your body time to adjust and adapt, and that is the hardest thing about being a footballer.

"You go out there every day and you're at risk of being injured and you never know what that could be. You don't wish it on anyone, but at the end of the day it can happen. That's the job we all signed up for.

"So you've just got to do everything in the meantime to look after your body the best you can, get the treatment and the physio – and we have amazing physio support to try and prevent these things."

The hard yards would prove worth it. While it was tough sitting out the Champions League finals of 2018 and 2019, Alex featured in 30 of Liverpool's 38 games as he and his team-mates were crowned Premier League champions for the first time in 2019/20.

"When we lost the Champions League final in Kiev, the injury hadn't really sunk in yet," he acknowledges. "Obviously I got injured in the semi-final so I think the final must have been four or five weeks afterwards and I was just trying to stay positive around the place, and winning that trophy would have capped it all off.

"I was willing the boys to go on and do that and I still felt a massive part of it. So when that didn't go how we wanted on the night, that's when it all hit me and I realised, 'I'm in a bit of bother here'.

"I was crying on the pitch. I got my medal and I think it's probably one of the first times I ever cried. I remember Robbo put his arm around me and that's when it all sort of hit me. I thought: 'Alright, we haven't won the Champions League and that's it. The





boys are going on holiday now and I'm starting the real rehab tomorrow and I've been told a year'.

"Then to get through that, come out the other end and go on and win a Premier League was fantastic. The season I missed [2018/19], seeing the boys do what they did, helped me massively as well. Getting so close to winning the league on 97 points…I wanted to be a part of that because I could see the team was getting closer.

"When I joined, we were quite a new team together going in the right direction. But that season was the one where I realised that we had a real good chance of winning the league. So to come back and be a part of that was amazing. That was my main thing



when I got back: to stay fit and be available as much as possible and to help us win the league.

"I think that first proper season I had back, I don't give myself enough credit for, but I think I was available pretty much the whole season.

"I remember when we went to Qatar for the Club World Cup, I rolled my ankle in the final and I missed seven days, It was seven days and three games in a week when we went to Leicester and won at the King Power and that was the only seven days I missed that season. Coming back from a major injury, that is something to be proud of.

"For it to be capped off with a Premier League title was a great feeling. At that point, when the club hadn't won the league for so long, you realise how difficult it is. To finally achieve that with this group of players was amazing. But there were definitely some tough times along the way."

The Ox has featured regularly again this season and has already played more games than he did in 2020/21. Although the Reds entered the new year trailing Manchester City in the Premier League, he still believes it can be a special year.

"I actually think we're a better team now. We know our level and we know that when we perform like we did at West Ham or Leicester and we're not quite on it, we will get punished and deservedly so.

"There was no, 'Oh that was unlucky' or anything. We've got more expectations of ourselves and we're more responsible for bad performances or when things aren't right. If we keep that attitude then we'll get good results.

"That's what shows that the team's moved forward, but the Premier League keeps moving forward too so it becomes tougher and tougher.

"We've just got to stay in the fight and see where it leads us."

I actually think we're a better team now, the Premier League keeps moving forward too so it becomes tougher and tougher but we've just got to stay in the fight and see where it leads us

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Alex says an FA Youth Cup tie at Queens Park Rangers in season 2009/10 put him on the pathway to a career in professional football, then with Southampton.

"We started the Under-18s season and I was an Under-17. A lot of the Under-18s were ahead of me, older and bigger physically. I wasn't in the team but I would come off the bench.

"We played QPR away in the FA Youth Cup and we lost 3-1, but [Saints manager] Alan Pardew and his staff came to watch. I had to start as I think there were injuries and I had a good game at a time when the team had a bad one. Alan Pardew came into our dressing-room and he took over the team-talk.

"We were in League One at that time and he would've had his eye on a lot of the U18s to become first-team players to come and help out.

"He gave a few lads a hard time that night but singled me out as a good performer. He said, 'You're with us tomorrow' and that was it. I went with the first-team the next day and never went back. It all changed very quickly.

"I had a great first season in the first team and really enjoyed it. I had some amazing senior pros around me which helped massively.

Adam Lallana, Rickie Lambert, Jason Puncheon, Dean Hammond, Kelvin Davis, Jose Fonte…they gave me that early education of what it meant to play men's football, and that helped me develop as a character. I've only got good memories from Southampton."

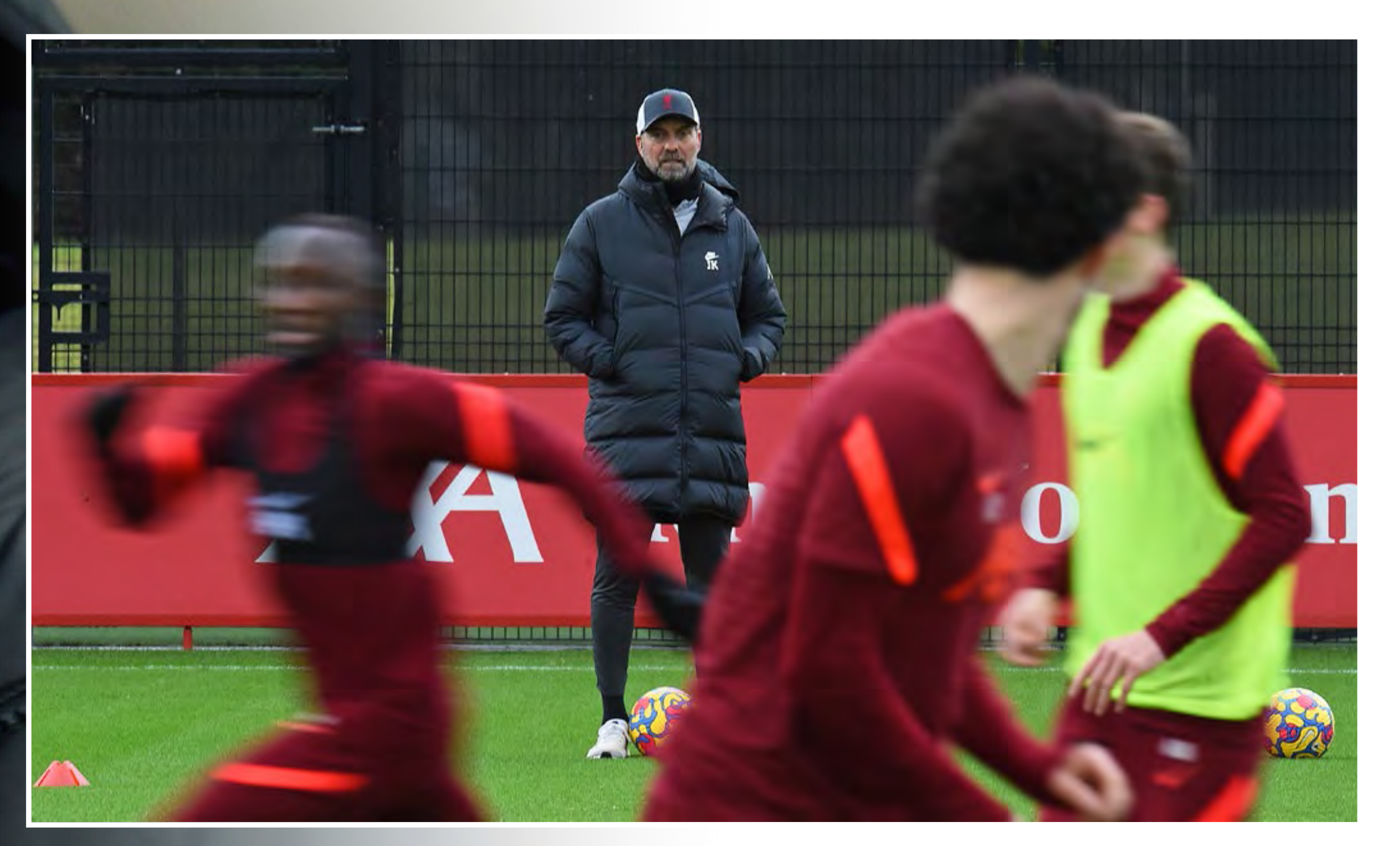
Alex made his senior Saints debut for Southampton in March 2010, coming on as a substitute in a 5-0 win over Huddersfield Town aged 16 years and 199 days.




L.F.C.

"THE THINGS WE DO ON THE PITCH"

At this midpoint in the 2021/22 season, manager Jürgen Klopp explains how the Reds have reacted and adapted over the last 12 challenging months, and why his LFC philosophy will never change



It's always fascinating and often entertaining to listen to Jürgen Klopp, and some of his most insightful comments come in pre-match press conferences. Here, prior to the game at Wolves which Liverpool won with that last-gasp Divock Origi goal, he discusses how the previous season's trials and tribulations were addressed before a ball had been kicked in the 2021/22 campaign…

"How can we increase the probability to win a football game? That's obviously the challenge for all of us and that was the problem we had obviously last season. I think we were in a good place in that season, after winning the league before with all the difficulties: no supporters, pandemic, all these kind of things.

> You can change the players, even when the specific skills that they have are difficult to replace, but when you can still stick to your patterns, to your philosophy if you want, then you are alright

"We were in a pretty good place and then we lost important players for us. Could we have reacted better? I really don't know, maybe yes is the easy answer, probably no… That's not important anymore. The thing is, we just realised in that moment how much we relied on specific things and I know you [the questioner] mean players but we mean patterns. So you can change the players, even when the specific skills that they have are difficult to replace, but when you can still stick to your patterns, to your philosophy if you want, then you are alright.

"But for us it was not possible anymore so we had to adapt things and that's why, over the year, we realised in games, 'Oh my God, now we have that problem, which we didn't have the week before'. In the end, it's all about how you don't score anymore and how you concede. But we have to work in-between these two areas, so when the [2020/21] season was over we were quite positive with the news that the players come back and we can build again on that.

"So, we brought Ibou [Konate] in, which was really, really important just to give us the security and things like this [so] that similar things cannot happen anymore. We kept Nat Phillips here – not too cool for the boy but he's fine with it and he improves here like crazy – just to make sure that we can rely on this kind of spine.



"Going from there, if you are protected we know the things we do on the pitch have now a clear basis again and you have to think how can you use that. That was the thought-process and during the pre-season we are constantly in a room [together] and then on the pitch…

"We had a long camp or two camps actually. We were really long on the road then and we had a lot of time to talk about it. It's clear the influence of Pep [Lijnders] and Vitor [Matos] is massive just because they are brilliant football brains. Pete [Krawietz] as well is constantly concerned about how to use the things we have with the analysis team together.

"So we put some videos together [on] what did we do in the most positive moments and what can we do even better. We didn't reinvent ourselves new – we just built on a basis. That's the good thing when you are longer together, you don't have to make a lot of changes. That's how it is.

"It's not as exciting as you want [in terms of an answer] and we are not there yet [in terms of], 'Okay, that's how it should look exactly'. We are still trying to improve but for the moment it worked in moments and the players feel it. That's very helpful, the benefit of it.

"But in the end, you cannot be offensively creative unless you are perfectly protected because [if not] it is then children's football like, 'Oh my God, let's run there' and then you have nobody in the decisive area. So that's a constant process to get that sorted, to keep that balance, and I don't think it will ever stop, to be honest, this process.

"Whatever you create upfront, you need to be protected because it is football and you cannot expect that it will end up with a goal. That's it."





I AM LEGEND

As if Divock Origi would ever say so himself. But we all know he is. Your favourite Div moment to date? Quite a few to choose from. Read on, enjoy

Words: Chris McLoughlin

"What would anyone's life be like without Divock Origi?" pondered James Milner in his 2019 book *Ask A Footballer*. "Would we have won the Champions League without him?

Possibly not. His contributions against Barcelona in the semi-final and Spurs in the final were absolutely immense. It felt like almost every time we needed a big goal that season he came up with it."

It was during that 2018/19 campaign when Divock Origi truly established himself as not just a Liverpool cult hero, but a Liverpool legend.

It wasn't just that he scored a Merseyside derby winner, a winner at St James' Park, twice in the Champions League semi-final and the European Cup-winning clincher in the same season – it was how, where and when he scored them that makes his story all the more remarkable.

And it is a story that Origi is still writing in his own unique way. After a quiet 2020/21 campaign in which he only scored once, at Lincoln City in the Carabao Cup, the word on the tweet was that Origi's Anfield days were numbered. He'd be off. But he stayed right where he was and added to Liverpool folklore.

First start of the season: an assist for Mo Salah in a 3-2 win against AC Milan in the Champions League.

Second start of the season: an assist for Takumi Minamino and a goal in a 3-0 win at Norwich in the Carabao Cup.

Third start of the season: a ridiculous goal in a 2-0 win at Preston North End in the Carabao Cup.

Fourth start of the season: the winning goal in a 2-1 Champions League victory against AC Milan in the San Siro.

Four starts, three goals, two assists and this from a player who is better known for being a super-sub. Which takes us to the best contribution of all.

A month prior to Liverpool's trip to Wolves, he'd reminded everyone that he can score goals in the Premier League too when he came on at West Ham and fired home a shot on the turn. The Reds lost 3-2, but it again showed that when given an opportunity, the Belgian international striker can get you a goal.


standard
chartered



"DIVOCK IS AN INCREDIBLE FOOTBALLER AND WHEN HE SCORES THE WINNER IT MAKES IT EVEN BETTER"



So, when Liverpool were struggling to break down Wolves – an old-school UEFA Cup team who play for 0-0 draws with a view to nicking one on the counter-attack – at Molineux in early December it was Origi who was sent on by Jürgen Klopp to be the game-changer.

As the old saying goes, cometh the 94th minute, cometh Origi. And as the travelling Kop wildly celebrated in the lower tier of the Steve Bull Stand with limbs all over the shop, it felt like the oft-tweeted 'Football Without Origi Is Nothing' banner should be flown from Anfield's flagpole corner for eternity.

"Divock Origi, the legend, came and finished it off for us – I love it," boomed a beaming Jürgen Klopp. "He is an incredible finisher. If we don't know it at Liverpool, who should know it then? We saw that so often.

"I've said, it's difficult to get 500 minutes a week in this team because of the players we have. But Divock Origi is an incredible football player. He is great in these moments. He doesn't need a lot of run-up or time to find into a game, and especially not in this game today.

"It was his game, he could be Divock Origi 100 percent: in and around the box, use your body, use your technique, finish the situations off.

"These kinds of goals we see plenty of times in training and everywhere. Winning in the 94th minute is great, but when Div scores the goal it makes it even better, to be honest."

That goal was Origi's 11th as a substitute for Liverpool – only David Fairclough (18), Daniel Sturridge (13) and Ryan Babel (12) have got more – and his 29th goal as a starter (and 40th overall) came a few days later in Italy.

The history books will forever show that the maiden meeting between 13-times European Champions AC Milan and Liverpool in the San Siro was settled by virtue of a Divock Origi header.

That it is the least crucial, and least famous, of his four Champions League goals is just typical Origi. Maybe we should have seen his cult-status coming, though.

Signed from Lille in 2014 after becoming Belgium's youngest scorer at a World Cup when netting against Russia at the age of 19, Origi stayed on loan in France for a year before arriving on Merseyside in the summer of 2015.

He made just two starts and two substitute appearances under Brendan Rodgers, failing to score, but was named in Klopp's first Liverpool starting XI at Spurs in October of that year.





By the time the Reds travelled to Southampton for a League Cup quarter-final, Origi was goalless after 10 appearances. You'd think spending the night being marked by Virgil van Dijk wasn't going to see any ducks broken, but up against his toughest direct opponent yet Origi scored his first Liverpool goal. And his second. And his third to become the first Red to net his first three Liverpool goals in the same game.

"It is very difficult to score three times in one game so when you get a hat-trick, like I did at Southampton, you have to treat it as a very special day in your career," he reflected.

"It was a very special day for me. It was very important to get my first Liverpool goals because as a striker you always want to score. I cherish moments like that very much. I kept the match-ball from that game."

Less than a fortnight later came Origi's late equaliser to force a 2-2 draw at home to West Brom. It was his first Anfield goal and famously prompted Klopp to take all of his players down to the Kop to celebrate.

The doubters mocked, the believers realised it was a 'never give up' message and from that moment Klopp's fortress Anfield was built. It took a global pandemic and a season of behind-closed-doors football before visitors could penetrate it.

Only a Willy Caballero save prevented Origi from heading home a 109th-minute winner in the League Cup final against Manchester City at Wembley. Divock was Liverpool's fifth-choice penalty-taker that day but never got to take his spot-kick.

And in April 2016 the Belgian was in red-hot form. He hit five goals in six games, including home and away strikes against Borussia Dortmund in the Europa League,

"I scored at Anfield against Borussia Dortmund and that was one of the most exciting games of my life. I liked scoring away from home against Dortmund, but at Anfield it was special. The atmosphere was crazy that night. It was something special and it felt different after the game.

"I prefer scoring at home because of the Liverpool fans. When you see the joy on their faces and you can share your joy with them it is the most beautiful thing that there is. The supporters in Anfield help you and there are no words to describe how passionate and supportive they are."

Unfortunately for Origi he then suffered an injury after scoring in a 4-0 win against Everton at Anfield.

"He just got injured in the wrong moments," reflected Klopp recently. "I still remember and it's one of the really, really decisive moments in the Everton game when Div was flying at that time.

"We played a game at Dortmund and everyone was asking me, 'What kind of striker is that?' They had lost Lewandowski a few months before to Bayern Munich and they were like 'Oh my God – he's pretty much the same level'.

And then Div got really badly injured [against Everton] and we had to rush him back for the Europa League final. These kinds of things are influential for careers.

"Then, step-by-step, we improved with a specific line-up and very often it was Bobby, Mo and Sadio and Div was behind them. He played the role and that is how life is."

Origi was Liverpool's most-used player during season 2016/17, making 43 appearances and scoring eleven goals (including another against Everton in a 3-1 Anfield derby win that inspired Jamie Webster's 'Saturday night and I like the way you move, Divock Origi' song). But the arrival of Salah in the summer of 2017 cost him his place.

He subsequently went out on loan to Wolfsburg, meaning he missed the Reds' run to the Champions League final in Kiev.

"I was in the Dominican Republic with my mum," he told LFCTV. "We were staying in a nice hotel and the guy who worked there was a Liverpool fan, so he put up a screen in the cafe and I was just watching it hoping that we would win as a fan.

"I remember texting the coach after the game. I didn't want to say many words, but used the bicep emoji to say 'keep strong, keep on going' and I said 'We are going to be back next season'.

"That text never went through, but in my head I said 'we', as if I was in it. I don't even know if the manager knows, but the text never went through.

"In the end I came back and ended up scoring in the final, so that was quite symbolic. Maybe it was fate, definitely."

Six months later, in December 2018, came his famous Merseyside derby winner. To put into perspective how Lazarus-like Origi's comeback was, before he was brought on against Everton in the 84th minute and headed past Jordan Pickford with 96 minutes on the clock, Divock had played just 11 minutes of football all season, coming on as a late substitute during a 2-0 defeat in Belgrade against Red Star.

"I feel a lot of emotion when I think of that game," he recalled in the official matchday programme. "It was a game that was open to the









last minute and for me to score the winning goal was a very special moment after not being involved a lot.

"It was quite an unusual goal. Before the goal I had hit the post already, but then I saw the ball going up in the air after Virgil sliced it. I just followed the ball – my instinct as a striker took me closer to the keeper, because you never know. The ball hit the crossbar and came back in. I just had to put it in."

What happened next also made James Milner's book. "The stoppage-time winner he scored against Everton in the derby – why did he rush to get the ball out of the net afterwards and run back to the halfway line? I genuinely believe he thought we still needed another goal to win the game. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest!"

Origi laughed when he heard what Milner had written. "In that moment I was just in the mode of 'we need to get a goal' and when it happened it was so surreal that I just stopped thinking and grabbed the ball. I guess it shows the mentality of the team to keep going, so that is a good thing.

"To score in the last minute was good, but for me it was even more special to see the fans celebrate and what winning meant for the club, for the team and to get the points we needed at that time. It was a moment to be grateful for."

It was a moment that changed Origi's career and later that season came his late headed winner at Newcastle to keep the Reds in the title race, the first and last goals in the sensational 4-0 Champions League semi-final comeback against Barcelona and, of course, his career defining moment in Madrid when he took Joel Matip's pass in his stride and fired a shot low into the bottom corner to give Liverpool a sixth European Cup.

"Liverpool is celebrating today," he said as an open-top bus crawled through a season of red in the city centre. "It means a lot to the people. I can see it in their eyes."

Origi scored six times during Liverpool's 2019/20 title-winning campaign – including two more in a 5-2 Anfield win against Everton – and this season added an overhead scorpion-kick goal to his repertoire in the 2-0 Carabao Cup victory at Deepdale.

"That goal was unbelievable and that's just what Divock can do," said Neco Williams, whose shot had deflected towards Origi.

"For me, he is one of the best finishers in the club. When you're training and playing with him week-in, week-out, you see the quality he brings and the finishes he produces in training.

"WHEN YOU'RE TRAINING AND PLAYING WITH HIM, YOU SEE THE QUALITY THAT HE BRINGS"

"He's replicated some of them in games this season, not just with the Preston goal but the late winner at Wolves and the winner against AC Milan in the San Siro. That's just what Divock does and if he can carry on scoring goals and doing what he does it will be fantastic for the team."

As others have said before, it is an unusual situation to have a player who makes so many big contributions despite not being a regular starter, something Klopp addressed before Christmas.

"It's like I said after the Wolves game, if you are not a starter for Liverpool it does not mean you are not a world-class player. It is possible. I know some people see it differently from time to time, but in specific moments, Div is outstanding.

"He had brilliant games for us from the start. In one of the biggest games in our history – against Barcelona, for example – he started, played an incredible game and scored the goals in the right moments. It's just part of his skillset, that's it.

"He can shoot with right and left. His technical level is incredible. He's really, really, really quick. How he is in the air, we all know, a monster as well. He is a really interesting package. But that doesn't mean that you are a constant starter for Liverpool FC because of the quality we have.

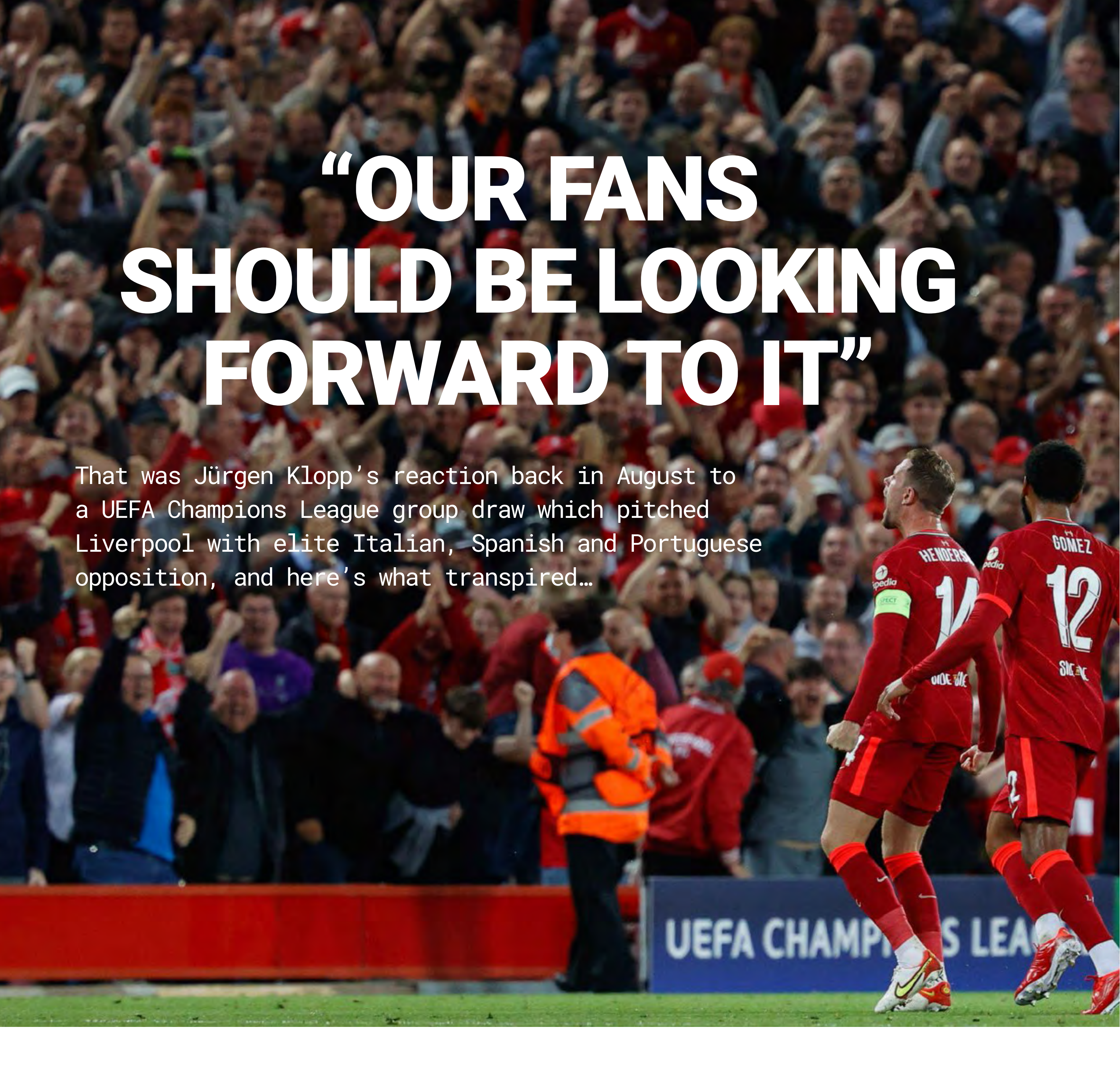
"There are worse things than not being a constant starter for Liverpool FC I tell you. It's really nice to be part of this squad, really nice to be part of this team.

"It's a nice story, so let's carry on from here."

Divock Origi's goal in Milan remains his most recent for the Reds due to a muscle-injury ruling him out since, and while it seems unlikely that the 26-year-old will ever be Liverpool's first-choice striker, you just know he will add to his legend and cult-status.

Just now how, when, where and who against...





"OUR FANS SHOULD BE LOOKING FORWARD TO IT"

That was Jürgen Klopp's reaction back in August to a UEFA Champions League group draw which pitched Liverpool with elite Italian, Spanish and Portuguese opposition, and here's what transpired…

The date is Thursday 26 August 2021. The Champions League group draw has just taken place in Istanbul and Jürgen Klopp can't help but see the funny side in Kirkby.

Group B will be a four-way straightener between Liverpool, AC Milan, FC Porto and Atletico Madrid. He tells the club website: "I laughed, to be honest, pretty loud because it is a tough group obviously. It's Champions League, so that's how it is, and you have to play the best teams in Europe, and obviously some of them are in our group!

"We played, I don't know how often, already against Porto, so they will be waiting for us. We have obviously a little bit of an 'open bill' with Atletico, and AC Milan, a historical one obviously. So, I think our supporters should be looking forward to it – we do, for sure.

"We're ambitious and would like to show that the really hard work from last year, qualifying for the Champions League, was worth it. That's how we will play the games."

Wednesday 15 September. For the first time ever, AC Milan play at Anfield, in front of a capacity Champions League crowd for the first time in 18 months. After those two pulsating finals between the Reds and the *Rossoneri* in 2005 and 2007, a new encounter for these two clubs with a combined total of 13 triumphs in the competition is hardly likely to be a low-key affair.

Sure enough, it's a breathless start under the floodlights with a goal by a marauding full-back and a missed penalty from the main man, before a stunning response from the visitors just before half-time, then a bullish reaction from the hosts after the break and a sensational winner from the skipper.

Barney Ronay of *The Guardian* describes how "the red and cream shapes spun and surged, exchanging darts and overloads, as the crowd generated that rolling surge of heat and noise under the low white lights" on "a wild, ragged, strangely dreamy night of early group-stage Champions League football."

Reds boss Jürgen Klopp, who rests Virgil van Dijk and gives a first start of the season to Divock Origi, calls the victory "deserved but we had ten minutes where Milan nearly changed the whole tie.

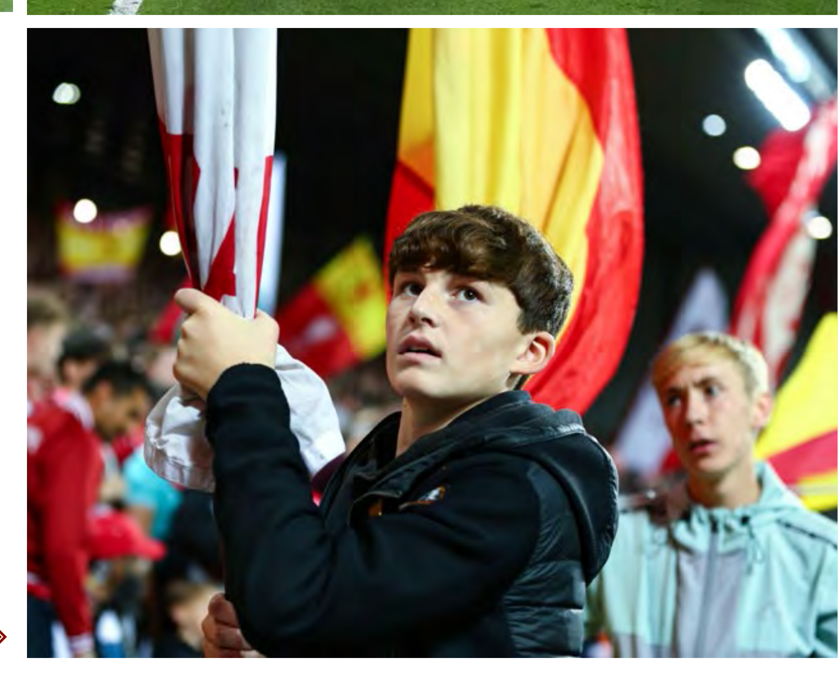
"We are experienced in the competition, or should be. Now that we've won, I can say that the changes we made were the right thing to do because playing every three days is just not possible with the same guys. The guys who came on did incredibly well.

"It is a tough group. That is why it is important we won this game.









It does not decide anything but it gave us a winning start."

His AC Milan counterpart Stefano Pioli graciously claims: "We have faced a great opponent. Of course, Liverpool are at the top, whereas we are still missing something. We will use these games to grow and move forward in the competition.

"Liverpool played with very high intensity. Physically, their intensity is remarkable. In some situations I think we had to do better, especially with the ball, trying to keep their pressure less."

Match-winner Jordan Henderson speaks of "a rollercoaster" which was "very good to watch as a neutral. It was nice to have fans back at a European night at Anfield, for an amazing game in the end."

He adds: "I thought for the majority of the game our performance level was really good. Obviously we had a spell towards the end of the first half, the last ten to 15 minutes, where we weren't quite at it and we were a little bit sloppy and we got punished with two goals.

"So [we were] going in at half-time a little bit disappointed that we were behind but went through some finer details and what could help us in the second half, and the lads came out and performed extremely well and managed to find a win.

"Overall we've got to be delighted."

“IT’S ALL GOOD FOR TONIGHT”

Porto, again. Surely not another walkover. This is the fifth time we’ve met in the Champions League since Jürgen Klopp became Reds boss and Liverpool have won more games (three), scored more goals (11) and kept more clean-sheets (three) against them than any other opponent in the competition under JK.

In their favour Porto – quarter-finalists last season and unbeaten to date in their domestic league – have also kept a clean-sheet in each of their last three group-stage games at the Estadio do Dragao. But their goalless Group B opener away to Atletico Madrid saw just eleven shots attempted (five for, six against) – the fewest of any matchday one fixture – while on the same evening Liverpool had 23 efforts on goal against AC Milan. The Reds arrive fresh from a 3-3 draw at Brentford in the Premier League.

To make matters worse for the hosts, they had defender Chancel Mbemba sent off in stoppage-time at Atletico and they’ll be missing veteran centre-half Pepe who was injured in that same game and didn’t make it through the warm-up for this one.







Eighteen minutes in and you-know-who opens the scoring, a shot from Curtis Jones parried into Mo's path for him to tap home. Sadio Mane knocks in the second when Porto keeper Diogo Costa fails to cut out a cross, and in doing so becomes the third Liverpool player to score 20 times in the Champions League after Steven Gerrard and Salah.

Mo fires Liverpool's third through the goalie's legs on the hour-mark from a Jones pass before Porto get one back through Mehdi Taremi's header. But substitute Roberto Firmino nets twice in five minutes to seal the win. He rolls his first into an empty goal from distance after Costa had rushed out to intercept a Jones through-ball, and he scores his second after a Jones shot is deflected to him.

"We played some good football and scored nice goals but had even better chances," says the boss. "It's all good for tonight."

The 5-1 scoreline, on the day that Liverpool FC mourns the loss of goalscoring legend Roger Hunt, means the Reds have scored 14 goals in three visits to this venue. They sit top of the group ahead of Atletico who come from behind to win 2-1 at Milan thanks to a Luis Suarez stoppage-time penalty.



"THE DIRTY POINTS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT"

Next, a double-header against Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid and a familiar trip to the Spanish capital on 19 October.

Having clinched a sixth Champions League trophy at this very venue in June 2019, then reacquainted themselves with the Wanda Metropolitano for a feisty first leg against Atletico in February 2020, the Reds know what's in store: drama, noise, intensity.

Front-footed Liverpool dominate possession, 63 per cent to 37, but against this well-drilled team it counts for little. Being clinical is what matters and Mo Salah – who else – leads the early charge, scoring with a low shot that appears to deflect off James Milner. Within five minutes it's 2-0, Naby Keita volleying past Jan Oblak from the edge of the box.

As if Atletico are ever going to lie down in front of their own fans. They hit back with two well-taken goals from Antoine Griezmann before half-time and Liverpool are indebted to Alisson – our man-of-the-match – for making four big saves before Griezmann is sent off for his unfortunate, unintentional high kick at Roberto Firmino.

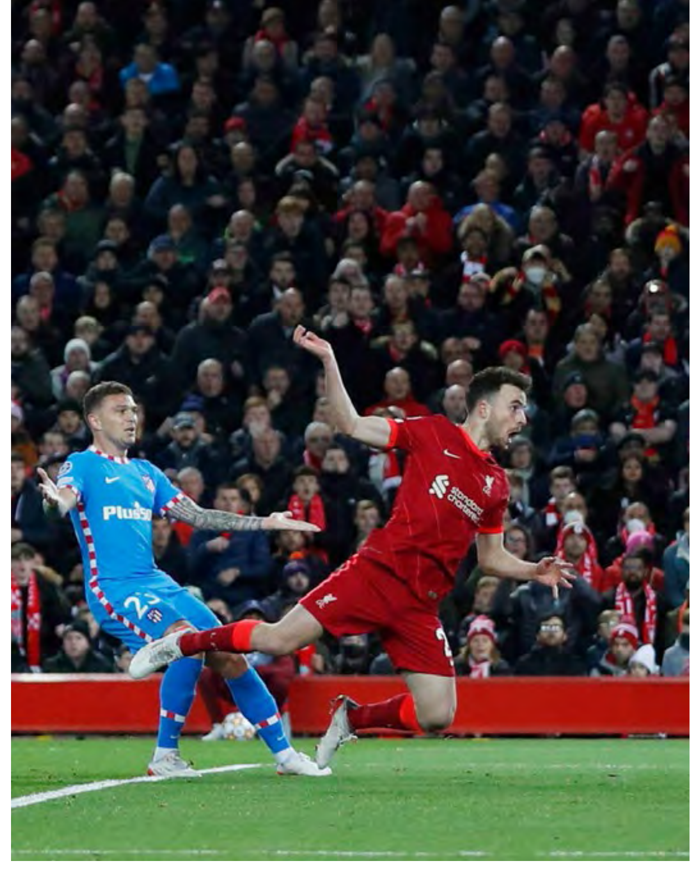
Salah then wins it from the spot after Diogo Jota is fouled by Mario Hermoso, converting at the same end of the ground as he did against Spurs in the Champions League final.

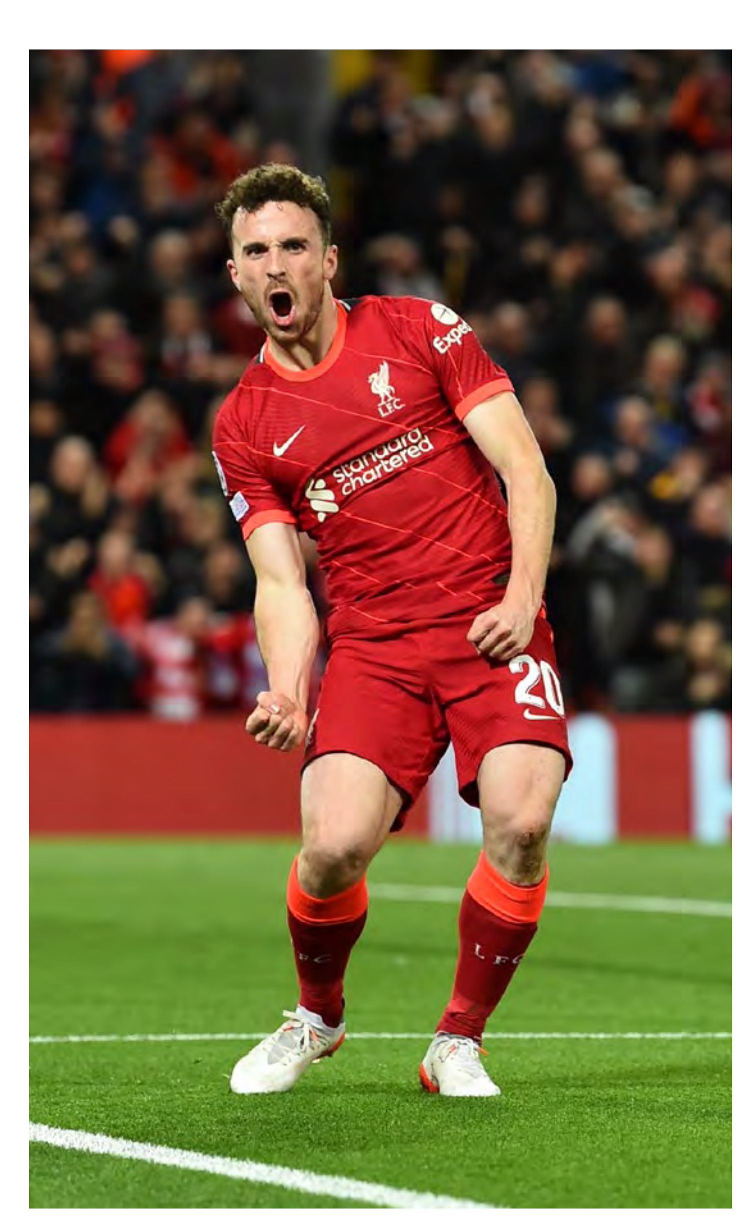
The hosts have a late penalty award overturned by VAR and Jürgen Klopp admits the match was "a real fight. The 'dirty' three points are very often the most important. It was not our best football, but we got them."




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"THE LEVEL OF THE TEAM IS HUGE"

We've been here before, although the stakes were higher last time Atletico were in town. Once again the Reds need a win to progress, but that's because their form so far has been sensational – three wins out of three, five points clear of second spot and qualification a matter of when not if.

A fortnight after the game in Madrid, it's another Anfield tango between Diego Simeone and Jürgen Klopp, with Luis Suarez on accordion – no wonder the fireworks come two days early to L4.

The Liverpool boss relishes the occasion in his matchday programme notes: "The feeling you get when this place is 'on it' is an experience you can never have too much of. Anfield on a European night is a healthy addiction. Let's give it all we have and find joy in the moment."

Atletico win the toss and elect to attack the Kop in the first half. On 13 minutes they go one down to Diogo Jota's instinctive far-post header from Trent Alexander-Arnold's bouncing cross. On 27 it's two-nil, Trent finding Sadio Mane who finished first-time with his left foot. On 36 it's eleven versus ten, centre-half Felipe fouling Mane then snubbing ref Danny Makkelie's summons to earn a red card.

The second period is relatively tame, although both sides have goals ruled out by VAR. At the final whistle the possession breakdown is 68 per cent to 32 in Liverpool's favour, with 17 shots for the Reds and six for Atletico. Man of the match: Trent.

It means Liverpool have won Group B with two games to spare and equalled a club record of 25 games unbeaten in what is Klopp's 200th win as boss.

He's asked how he will approach the final two matchdays in the group. "The next one is at home, the game after that is at the San Siro and I've never played there, so I'm really excited about that.

"We will play at home [against Porto] and play real football. Can you imagine we play Porto at home, the crowd is really coming from all over the world to watch the games and then you offer, I don't know, a half-cooked dish? That is not how it will be.

"We go for it. We want to win football games. That's all. Sometimes you can qualify for something, sometimes not, but it is still the same thing – you play a game, you want to win it, you show it."

Among the many admirers of that mentality is a familiar face watching from the stands, former Atletico and Liverpool striker Fernando Torres. "It's amazing," he says. "From the outside you can see all the hard work the club is doing and Jürgen also. The level of the team is huge, it's great.

"I think Jürgen understood from the first day the passion of the fans and they put it all together to create a great team. For me, it's always special to see Liverpool playing and to be back in Liverpool is even more special because it's the first time I've watched a game in England since I retired – and it had to be here in Liverpool."



"SUCH A THUNDERBALL – GREAT GOAL"

Porto, like Atletico three weeks earlier, are back at Anfield with at least a point to prove and a chance to boost their qualification hopes for the knockout rounds. They're second in Group B, just ahead of the men from Madrid who host Milan this evening.

Skippered by keeper Alisson, the Reds rotate their full-backs with Neco Williams and Kostas Tsimikas in for Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson, while Ibrahima Konate partners Joel Matip in central defence. In midfield it's young Tyler Morton making his Champions League debut alongside Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Thiago. Upfront Takumi Minamino starts with Mo Salah and Sadio Mane upfront.

The visitors should go one-up but midfielder Otavia slices wide in front of an open goal. Upon losing skipper Pepe to injury, they're punished early into the second half when Thiago shows stunning technique to score sweet and low from 25 yards at the Kop end – gif-gif-hooray – before Salah jinks past a defender and fires home at the near-post on 70 minutes.

It is the 16th consecutive game in which Liverpool have scored two or more goals and Thiago's strike impresses the boss. "Whoever sees him in training knows he has the technique to do it. But even with this technique it doesn't happen constantly that he can fire such a thunderball. Great goal."

As for Porto, their quest for the knockout rounds is helped by Milan's late win at Atletico, meaning all three of these teams will battle it out for the final last-16 place, behind the Reds, in two weeks' time.



“AN EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE”

Be honest, were you really expecting the Reds, long-since qualified, to take all three points from a side desperate to get through and roared on by their home fans, not least when the hosts go ahead on the half-hour mark?

Either way Tuesday 7 December 2021 becomes, as Jürgen Klopp later puts it, “an exceptional performance and just another chapter in the history of this wonderful group of players” on the hallowed stage of the San Siro.

Fikayo Tomori puts the hosts ahead from a corner, but Mo Salah slots home the equaliser on 36 minutes after Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain’s shot is only parried by Milan keeper Mike Maignan. It’s the Egyptian ace’s 20th goal of the season and a club-record seventh in the group stage.

Three days after his last-gasp winner at Wolves, forward Divock Origi heads home the decisive second-half goal after Maignan can only palm out Sadio Mane’s powerful shot. At the other end, Nat Phillips and Ibrahima Konate nullify the threat from Zlatan Ibrahimovic and co, with Nat even ending a Milan attack with a rather nifty Cruyff turn.

In the game’s dying embers Jürgen Klopp brings on youngsters Max Woltman and Conor Bradley and later tells BT Sport: “We needed fresh legs and we needed desire to play this game, which was really difficult in the hectic schedule we have. What the boys did tonight, I couldn’t be prouder. The performance was absolutely outstanding. So many good things I saw tonight and I’m happy.”

The Reds become the first English club to win all six Champions League group games. Milan finish third and drop into the Europa League as Atletico win 3-1 in Porto to secure the runners-up spot.




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INTER THE NEXT ROUND

Nine things to know about the forthcoming Champions League last-sixteen tie between the Reds and the black-and-blues of Milan

The Champions League last-16 tie with Inter Milan is a repeat of the 2007/08 season when the sides met at the same stage of the competition. Liverpool and Inter have faced each other on four previous occasions: in the semi-finals in 1965 when the *Nerazzurri* won 4-3 on aggregate, and in 2008 when the Reds prevailed 3-0. The first leg is at San Siro on Wednesday 16 February 2022, the return at Anfield on Tuesday 8 March 2022.

Remember: the away-goals rule has been scrapped from the 2021/22 season, so if the tie is level after 180 minutes it goes to extra-time, regardless of the number of away-goals scored by each team. If the scoreline remains level after extra-time, a penalty shootout takes place.

Inter were initially picked out to face Ajax, with Liverpool against RB Salzburg, but the original draw in Nyon was voided owing to technical problems with UEFA's software. The draw for the quarters, semis and final is set to take place on Friday 18 March. The final will be in Saint Petersburg on 28 May 2022. The other ties: RB Salzburg v Bayern Munich; Sporting Lisbon v Manchester City; Benfica v Ajax; Chelsea v Lille; Atletico Madrid v Manchester United; Villarreal v Juventus; PSG v Real Madrid.



Inter finished second behind Real Madrid in Group D and above Sheriff Tiraspol and Shakhtar Donetsk, to reach the knockout stage for the first time in a decade. They won three, lost two and drew one. They scored eight goals and conceded five. On the UEFA website they are described in ten words like this: "Strong defensively and creating plenty of opportunities but not clinical." They favour a 3-5-2 formation.







Simone Inzaghi replaced Antonio Conte as coach last summer. After his team had qualified for the last 16, he said: "The important thing will be to get there, when the time comes, in the best possible condition. We are growing. We played well in both [group] games against Real Madrid but lost them both. Obviously we have to do something more."

Jürgen Klopp on the draw: "I've had to wait 54 years to play at San Siro for the first time…and now it'll be twice in three months [after the AC Milan group game] so that's good news! Of course it is a tough draw, definitely. They are the league leaders in Italy, a good team in good form. Obviously [Alexis] Sanchez and [Edin] Dzeko we know well, and Lautaro Martinez is one of the most exciting strikers in the world. It's a proper Champions League tie and I am absolutely looking forward to it."

Inter are reigning Italian champions and again setting the pace at the top of Serie A. At the end of December, coach Inzaghi said: "We're delighted with the way we've finished 2021. We'll rest up a bit now then get going again next year with the same spirit. I had big hopes when I joined Inter, then I got to know the players and that reinforced my belief. It's easy for people to say Inter are a juggernaut now but it's not what they were saying in July – that has to be an incentive for us going forward as there will be lots more hurdles for us to clear."

Inter have won the European Cup/Champions League trophy three times: 1963/64, 1964/65, and most recently 2009/10 under Jose Mourinho when they beat Bayern Munich in the final.

Jürgen might be looking forward to a San Siro return, but the famous stadium's days look numbered. Inter and AC Milan have unveiled plans for a new venue next to the original ground which, says the official press release, will be "a celebration of the artistic and cultural heritage of Milan, its design inspired by two of the most famous buildings in the city: the Duomo di Milano [cathedral] and the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele [shopping arcade]."





MINAMINO
HERE WE GO AGAIN

Ace attacker Taki talks Cherry Blossoms, Red Bulls, Redmen, Blue Samurai, and his skills on both the football pitch and the gaming console



Words: Chris McLoughlin

Later this year it will be a decade since Takumi Minamino made his debut as a professional footballer. Born in Izumisano in Japan's Osaka Prefecture on 16 January 1995 (happy 27th birthday, Taki), he was seven when he watched the 2002 World Cup finals hosted by Japan and South Korea on TV.

Young Minamino was inspired to become a footballer by Brazilian legend Ronaldo.

'Nanno', as he is known in Japan, was 12 when he joined Cerezo Osaka, a J-League club based 45 minutes from where he grew up. Over the next five years he developed into a goalscoring forward who helped Cerezo Osaka's youth teams to win leagues and reach cup finals.

On Christmas Day 2011 he played in the final of the J-Youth Cup against Nagoya Grampus U18s. They lost 2-1, but Taki finished as the tournament's leading goalscorer on 13.

Eleven months later, at the age of 17, he made his first-team debut for the club known as Sakura (the Cherry Blossoms) when brought on against Omiya Ardija. His first start came against Kawasaki Frontale on 1 December 2012 and a fortnight later Minamino got his first goal, in a 4-0 win over Shimizu S-Pulse in the Emperor's Cup.

Over the course of the next two seasons Minamino established himself in the Cerezo Osaka team, earning him the right to turn professional in March 2013 (youth-team players must play at least 450 minutes of first-team football in Japan to be eligible for a pro contract). He wore the number 13 shirt – a number considered unlucky by some but not Taki.

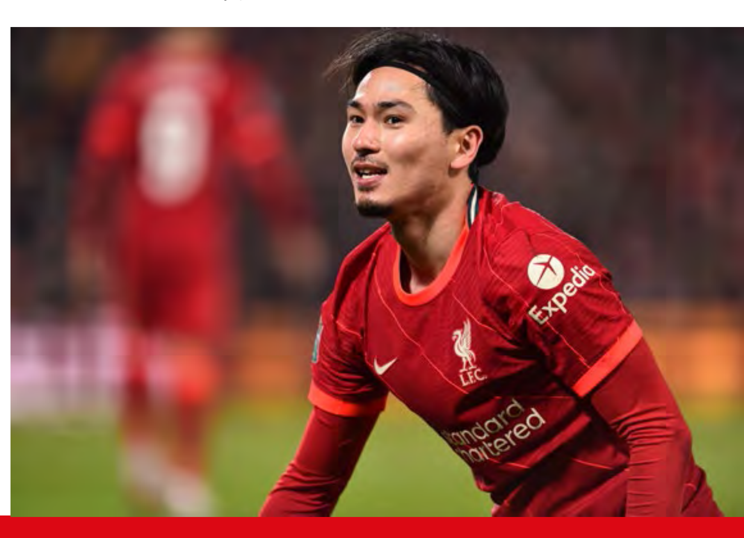
"I don't have any superstitions," he says. "I don't really worry about those kinds of things. On the contrary, my superstition may be that I don't really have any superstitions."

He first caught the attention of an English club when he scored from 20 yards in a friendly against Manchester United in July 2013. United's manager at the time, David Moyes, said he thought Minamino had potential to play in Europe, but there were bumps in the road ahead. A knee-ligament injury sidelined Taki in August 2013 and the following year he was sent off twice in four months for challenges that earned him straight red cards.

Even so, his performances also won him J-League Newcomer of the Year for 2013, a contract extension, the captain's armband for Japan U21s, and in 2014 he scored his first goals in the AFC Champions League.

Cerezo Osaka, however, were relegated that year and rather than play second-division football Minamino opted to move to Europe. It was an appropriate thing to do given Takumi means 'exploring and blossoming by himself'.

"When I was small my parents told me never to lose the



meaning of my name," he has previously said in an interview. "That continually renewed my determination to be successful in what I do."

The Japanese media reported that Minamino had travelled to Europe for trials with clubs in Italy, Germany and Switzerland. But in January 2015, at the age of 19, he signed for Austria's Red Bull Salzburg.

"We have had our eyes on Minamino for a long time, and we are convinced that he has great potential," said sporting director Ralf Rangnick, who now works down the road in Manchester.

"Playing in Europe is the next logical career step for a player like him, and we are very pleased that he would like to begin this journey with Red Bull Salzburg."

Taki was pleased with his new surroundings – not least "the river flowing through the centre of the city and the magnificent castle," he told the club website as he also introduced himself as a player.

"I am a rather attacking type, and I feel the happiest as an attacking midfielder. My best virtues are probably my dribbling strength, my speed, and I try to shoot a lot."

Over the next five years he was utilised in a variety of attacking positions and was a huge success in Salzburg. He scored 64 goals in 189 games, created many more for team-mates such as Erling Braut Haaland and Hwang Hee-Chan and won the Austrian Bundesliga-and-cup double in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

Minamino also won two league titles in 2020: one with RB Salzburg and of course one with Liverpool after moving to Anfield in the January transfer-window that year.

"My favourite moment here so far is when we won the Premier League," he says. "We raised the trophy at Anfield and I did it as a Liverpool player."

Not many players have scored against the Reds at Anfield, as Taki did for Salzburg in the Champions League, and won the league with them in the same season. But it was only a few months ago when he netted his first home goal for the Redmen in the 4-0 win against Arsenal.

"I am honestly glad to have scored my first goal of this season at Anfield," he admitted. "Also, the team won the match. It took me a bit longer than I'd been hoping for, but I am still happy."

A second Anfield goal followed a month later in the epic Carabao Cup quarter-final against Leicester City, this time the equaliser deep into stoppage-time to make it 3-3. It was his fourth goal in this season's tournament.

Two years ago this month, Minamino made his LFC debut against Everton in the FA Cup at Anfield – Curtis Jones announcing himself with the winner – and Kopites quickly had an ABBA-inspired song for the club's first-ever Japanese player: "Minamino, here we go again, why, why, Salzburg ever let you go..."

He also feels that he is a better footballer than the teenager who

When I was small my parents told me never to lose the meaning of my first name: to explore and blossom. That continually renewed my determination to be successful in what I do





Everything is at a much higher level in English football. The Premier League is superior in how quickly it switches between defence and attack, in the transitions, and also the speed at which everyone gets forward

arrived in Austria in January 2015. "Now I know how to make space through good movement, to get forward, to play thinking of how I can use my attributes for the team.

"I used to enjoy watching Liverpool matches, and the Premier League is one of the most popular leagues in Japan. It was my childhood dream to play for Liverpool but if I hadn't played at Salzburg, I wouldn't be here today.

"They played a pressing style and some managers in both the Bundesliga and the Premier League like this style. I've been able to develop my skills working with such managers. That experience is very important for me now.

"Everything is at a much higher level in English football. The Premier League is superior in how quickly it switches between defence and attack, in the transitions, and also the speed at which everyone gets forward.

"As a player it was very important for me to play in games to get used to the speed and the power of Premier League football so that is why I went to Southampton [on loan last season].

"Since I've come back to Liverpool I've felt that the experience of going on loan has been really good, but I still want to give more."

Minamino has only good things to say about Salzburg – "a very beautiful city" – and he likes life in Liverpool too, although he'd only spent a couple of months in the UK before the coronavirus outbreak.

"The atmosphere of the city is very good. Because of COVID I haven't had enough chances to get to know more about England just yet, but I would like to discover more things in the future."

He's not been shy of trying English food – "I like fish and chips!" – but when he returns to Japan to play with the international team it is natto which is the order of the day.

Natto is a traditional Japanese dish of fermented soya beans. Topped with soy sauce, chives or mustard and served with rice, it has a nutty taste, a sticky texture and distinctive smell. It's not one you'll find in the Anfield food-kiosks at half-time but something the Japanese international team love to tuck into.

"Natto is always ready for meals, even at away games," says Taki. "If you are in Japan, you wouldn't appreciate it as much, but we don't have many chances to eat natto living in other countries. It is very healthy food and I don't think there are any players who don't like it."

They'll all be dining together soon, COVID rules permitting, because Japan have got two huge World Cup qualifiers coming up at the end of the month.

While Liverpool are on their winter-break, Minamino will be heading back to the land of the rising sun to play against China (27 Jan) and Saudi Arabia (1 Feb) with Japanese hopes of reaching Qatar 2022 precariously positioned.

Japan are currently second in the six-team AFC qualifying group B, four points behind table-toppers Saudi Arabia and one point ahead of Australia.

Only the top two qualify automatically with the third-placed finishers facing a play-off against the third-placed team in group A. That winner then qualifies for an inter-continental play-off in Qatar in June against the nation that finishes fifth in the South American CONMEBOL qualifying stage.



As things stand, that would mean having to beat the United Arab Emirates followed by one of Colombia, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay or Paraguay – making it a tricky route with additional games.

Having lost at home to Oman in September and in Saudi Arabia in October, Minamino knows that, with a trip to Australia in March still to come, those next two games are must-win.

"The final stage has been difficult," he admits. "We are just managing to hang on to second place, but we are still in the position where we can go on to the World Cup without having to wait for other teams to drop points.

"There are no easy games at this stage and as a minimum requirement we need to win these two at home and I would like to approach them in a style where we are going all-out for the two wins.

"Playing at the World Cup was always my childhood dream. For all the people who are supporting us, I will be doing my very best to win the games and go to the World Cup."

Japan reached the last sixteen of the 2018 World Cup in Russia but were knocked out by Belgium, losing 3-2 having led 2-0 with 21 minutes to play. Surprisingly, Minamino wasn't in Japan's squad – after playing twice for his country in autumn 2015 he wasn't called up again for three years – but Japan's current manager Hajime Moriyasu was in Russia.

Moriyasu was assistant to Ashira Nishino and took over in the summer of 2018. He immediately brought Minamino back into the international fold and Taki responded with four goals in five games.

Playing at the World Cup with Japan was always my childhood dream – for all the people supporting us, I will be doing my very best to win games to get us there





In January 2019, Minamino was a key member of Japan's AFC Asian Cup squad that went all the way to the final in the UAE. He created two goals and won a penalty as Japan beat Iran in the semi-final. But despite him scoring in the final against Qatar, the Blue Samurai were beaten 3-1. Taki, who's scored 16 times in 35 games for Japan, clearly has a lot of faith in his manager.

"All the players trust in him. He makes us feel that we can come together as a group and do our very best in these games that will decide if we go to the World Cup, both for us and for him as well.

"He is a Japanese coach and I am totally on board with him and his ideas. I would like to go to the World Cup with this manager."

Just like at Liverpool, Minamino also has competition for his place in the national team. Brighton's Kaoru Mitoma, currently on loan with shock Belgian title-challengers Royal Union Saint-Gilloise, plays in the same position as Taki and made his international debut during a 1-0 victory in Oman in November.

Mitoma was brought on at half-time and Minamino, despite having scored nine goals during the World Cup qualifying campaign, was substituted 15 minutes later with the score 0-0.

Inevitably there is now talk in Japan about who should be starting when the China and Saudi Arabia games come around, but Minamino welcomes the competition from his team-mate.

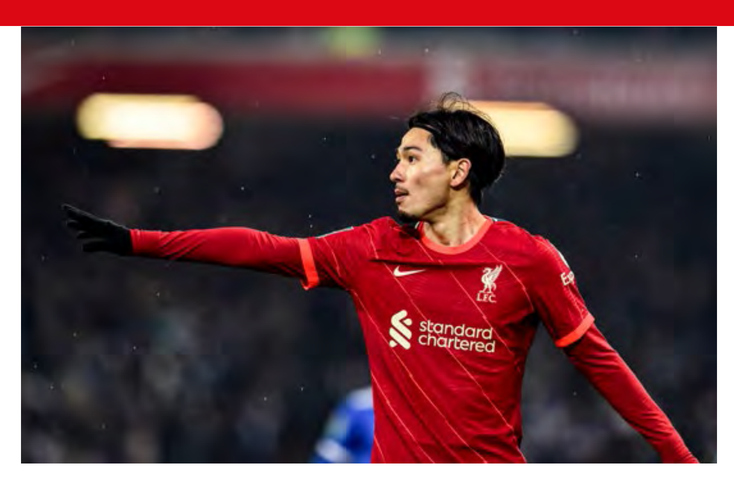
"He [Mitoma] has very unique changes of pace and direction to take him past opposition players. He is also capable of scoring and assisting at the very highest level.

"It was clear to see in the previous game that his qualities could be a powerful weapon for the Japan side, and I think he is one of the most important players in the team.

"There is always competition like this, especially when we are talking about the national team. Healthy competition is necessary in order to improve the team's potential.

"I welcome it, or rather I think that it is something that you really need. It's good that players can always improve their skills through being in competition with each other for a place in the side."

Minamino's best friend in the Japan squad is Hannover 96 right-



back Sei Muroya. "We are from the same town, and our houses were only ten minutes away from each other by bicycle. We speak with the same accent and because we've known each other since we were kids, I speak with him the most. We get on well."

Away from football, Taki is also a rather decent gamer. Coming from a nation that is home to Nintendo, Sega, Sony and changed video-gaming forever with the introduction of the NES, Master System, Megadrive, Super NES, Gameboy, Game Gear, PlayStation, DS, Wii, Switch (and made Super Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog some of the world's most famous characters) perhaps that isn't earth-shattering news. But maybe the most recent game he has been playing is. Have a guess…

If you said Fortnite, you're wrong. Call of Duty Vanguard? Nope. Grand Theft Auto V? Nada. He's not been sliding around on Mario Kart 8 either.

"I've been playing Pokemon on the Nintendo Switch," he says. "Have you heard of it? I played it recently and I've completed all the levels so I'm thinking of buying a new game to play."

Maybe it's time to get into FIFA 22, Taki, as Liverpool have got a pretty decent squad on there…



ONE

ON ONE

Current Reds keeper Alisson Becker meets David James, Liverpool's first Premier League no1, in a Sony Sports India interview which went like this…





DAVID JAMES: I've got questions from myself and the Liverpool fans back in India. First up, you've scored a goal so do you ever get the itch to play upfront one day?

ALISSON BECKER: To be honest, yes! I always like to play in different positions in training when I have the opportunity. It's helped me with playing with my feet as well.

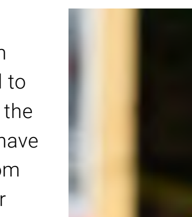
So yeah, why not? Maybe having the opportunity to play in a different role would be nice. But not now. Scoring the goal [at West Brom] is a nice memory.

DJ: When you were coming through as a goalkeeper was it normal that you were so good with your feet or have you had to work on that?

AB: I think the big thing is having confidence. You get confidence from doing things, from playing. You need to have a team which likes to play with the goalkeeper as well and you need to have a manager who gives you the freedom to play because you can be good [for the team].

But if your players turn their back to you when you have the ball, you can only kick long balls and work like that. I have the skills that are needed but I worked a lot on it when I was playing for my youth team. I had a manager once who loved the Guardiola team from Barcelona which used the goalkeeper a lot, so he tried to do that with his team in the under-20s and it helped me a lot.

Then I went to Rome and improved a little bit, but here at Liverpool is the place that I feel most comfortable because the players really want me to be an extra player on the pitch.





DJ: Two things stand out about you: you're incredible in one-on-one situations and never seem to throw yourself for dives – is that just down to great positioning?

AB: It's a mix of things, but I try to make things easier for myself. Sometimes if you dive you make things complicated for yourself and you don't have too many chances.

I'm playing in the Premier League and Champions League, so I'm up against players who can decide quickly to change the kick and who can look to the goalie, to the movement of the goalie. So I try to stay in balance.

Obviously having a good position helps a lot and that's something I practise a lot in training as well with [goalkeeping coaches] Johnny [Achterberg] and Jack [Robinson], like one-v-one situations. Then when it's needed, I'm there and I'm ready.

I just try to make things easier for myself. Sometimes it looks easier to other people but it's not – it's hard work.

DJ: You must be tempted sometimes to do the special save where your knees go really high?

AB: To be honest, I'm not because I like to play like I do. I respect those who do the saves for the camera, but if you always work to jump or to dive, you will play like that. Sometimes you have that temptation, but when I do and I see it afterwards on the camera, I say: what am I doing, it's not me. So I try to be myself on the pitch and in the way I play.

DJ: Do you think your job at Liverpool is harder than other keepers because the team plays with such a high line at the back?

AB: No, because I really like it. Normally the teams I used to play in, the manager liked to use high lines to press a bit higher. And I think I feel more involved in the game when I'm in a higher position.

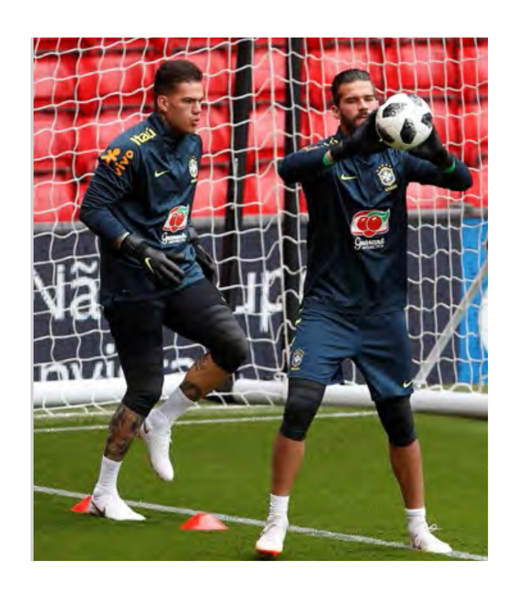
Obviously you need to be ready to go back to recover your position inside the box when the counter-attack is coming, but I like to play in a front-footed mood, always expecting to act, not only to react.

> The boss spoke with me and it was something I always had in mind, to have Taffarel working with me at Liverpool… With Brazil he is training me and Ederson, so why not work with him daily?

DJ: What can you expect from your Brazilian legend Claudio Taffarel after he joined the club's coaching staff?

AB: I think it was a really good move from the club. The boss spoke with me and it was something I always had in mind, to have someone like [Taffarel] working with me daily. Because I work in the national team with him, I know his qualities and what he can contribute.

I'm really happy with Johnny and Jack already and Taffa can bring us a lot of things. We don't need to talk about his legacy as a goalkeeper, but also as a goalkeeping coach he is one of the best. He is training me, training Ederson [Manchester City], and he is really helping us to improve. So why not have the opportunity to work with him daily?



DJ: Jürgen Klopp has mentioned that you guys want to develop your own goalkeeping philosophy. With Taffarel coming in, can you say what this philosophy is going to look like?

AB: I don't know if I can say. We will see what this philosophy looks like but in Brazil we create goalkeepers from the youth teams and develop them so they can be right here in the first team and they are ready. Technically, with power – good power, good reactions, good speed. And I really believe that Taffa can bring this to the club working together with Johnny and Jack.

For instance, the club invested in Marcelo Pitaluga who is a young goalkeeper who can become the first choice for Liverpool FC. We have Caoimh here who is doing a really good


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There was a lot of pressure because coming to Liverpool there is already pressure to play here, but I came here in the right moment and knew I could achieve big things

job too. We have other players, youth players with quality. So Taffa will help with that too.

In the next five years, we can see where this can bring us.

DJ: I did an interview with Heuelho Gomes once and he said that he didn't play in goal until he was 17. He used to play handball and one day he went to his college to play football. The goalie was missing, so he went in goal. The next year he signed for Cruzeiro and won the league.

AB: That's incredible, hey? I know a few stories like that. I think Weverton from Palmeiras is the same. He used to play as a striker then he went in goal and now he is twice-champion of the Libertadores and he is a keeper for the Brazilian national team as well.

But for myself it's been since I can remember, maybe six years old, because I was always the youngest one with my brother's friends. So it was always the case that the smallest one went in goal and tried to deal with the ball from the kicks.

DJ: You joined Liverpool after what happened against Real Madrid in Kiev. Did you feel there was more pressure on you for essentially delivering the Champions League?

AB: One hundred per cent. Yes, there was a lot of pressure because coming to Liverpool there is already pressure to play here. But I came here in the right moment and I was ready and I knew that I could achieve big things.

This was my goal for my career: to keep doing those kinds of things, achieving the titles, Premier League, Champions League, cups, everything, and with this team I had the possibility.

DJ: The late save [from Arkadiusz Milik] against Napoli at Anfield in the Champions League in 2018/19. Did you feel like that was the moment when you and the Kop 'joined' each other and you became one of them? You know the feeling I'm talking about?

AB: Yes, I think so. Because when I scored the goal [at WBA] there were no fans so that was the only negative part. But when I made that save, it was one of the brilliant moments that I lived here in Liverpool because it was really like scoring a goal.

I think it was in the last minute and it meant that we were going through [to the knockouts] and when you go on to win the title, it makes everything even more special.

That save didn't win us the title, it just gave us the possibility to go through to the next stage. But yes, it was a good feeling.

DJ: In my first derby, in the last minute I made a top-corner save in front of the Kop and we got a 2-1 win, I remember the feeling. So on to Barcelona. You held on to a shot from [Ousmane] Dembele, Liverpool won the second leg 4-0 and you gave an error-less performance. How did that feel?

AB: It was really good, really satisfying. I lived something similar with Roma where we lost the first game at Barcelona, 4-1, at the Camp Nou, then we won 3-0 at home and went through to the semi-finals and played against Liverpool.

So having the same experience with Liverpool was amazing, but it was even more difficult. We were confident and we trusted in ourselves and we knew that Anfield would be on fire. But we knew that we needed to do a perfect game and not give chances for Barcelona. How you do that against Barcelona, against Messi, against Suarez? And we did that.

We scored in the right moments. We didn't concede, we kept the clean-sheet and that made things easier for us. I could make a good performance as well because the team was really on its game, bringing the atmosphere onto the pitch from the supporters, so it wasn't too difficult for me to play that game.

The manager is like a father for me. I really like the way he makes the team feel comfortable and at the same time puts pressure on us. He's a guy who is always happy, but when you go onto the pitch it's hard work, serious work, so all those things contribute to a good relationship



DJ: The scenes after winning the Champions League were amazing. I was at that final as well and just being there to see you guys being successful was special. But winning the Premier League and not being able to celebrate with fans...is that something which is making you even more determined to win it again?

AB: Yeah, it gives a really good push for us because we did that for them as well. So that moment wasn't possible, but we felt like they were celebrating together with us. They were at home, of course, but you had the feeling that we were not alone.

The Premier League is tough. It's hard to win. There are a lot of good teams and the level is improving, improving, improving – not only the teams at the top but the others as well.

So yes, we need to stay focused, thinking game-by-game and then see what will happen. We have a good team. We have a team who can fight for it.

DJ: Yourself and Ederson are my favourite goalkeepers in world football. So what is it like when you have such a good friend but you're obviously competing for that number one spot?

AB: Well, I competed with my brother [Muriel] so for me it's not something new. At my former club, Internacional, I competed for the no1 shirt with him. But Ederson is a fantastic guy. He's a top goalkeeper, one of the best in the world, as you said, in my opinion as well.

So I'm really lucky to have him and to compete with him because you know how things work when you have someone in a high level – you need to work harder because you know if you give a little bit of space, he will come through and take the position. I know that and he knows that so we really enjoy working together.

We live close to each other here in England, but we don't see each other often because of the crazy schedule we have.

For me, it's a pleasure and an honour to be his friend and his team-mate in the national team and to be competing against him here in the Premier League.

DJ: It could be a Liverpool v Manchester City Champions League final. You do realise this?

AB: That would be something crazy, yeah? But we work for that, we work to be there. And we need to enjoy these moments because it's something unique.

DJ: You seem to have an amazing relationship with Jürgen Klopp. Has he ever told you off?!

AB: Yeah, it is a really good relationship. He's like a father for me. When I spoke with him for the first time on a FaceTime video-call, he just answered the call and started to smile, I started to smile and we could already see that we would have a connection. I think I have some feelings about life and how life works which are similar to him.

He's really experienced, more experienced than me of course – he will not be happy that I've said that! But I really like the way he works and the way he makes the team feel comfortable and at the same time puts pressure on us.

He's a guy who is always happy, but when you go onto the pitch it's hard work, serious work and he's a top manager, so all those things contribute to a good relationship.

I really love to be here and working with him. I love my life here at Liverpool.



"Seeing all the people in front of you in the name of the club is what it's all about"

Singer-songwriter Jamie Webster on his latest album, his forthcoming tour dates, and his unbreakable bond with Liverpool FC



Liverpool fans will know the name and story by now. In the space of a few years, singer-songwriter Jamie Webster has gone from playing LFC songs in backstreet boozers to selling out shows around the world with his original material.

"I'll never stop playing the Liverpool songs – those gigs will always be a massive part of me," he says when we catch up for an interview in the club's matchday programme. "Seeing all the people in front of you come together in the name of the club is what it's all about."

Right now, though, all eyes are on his second album *Moments* which arrives this month and the ambition is sky-high.

We meet Jamie halfway through his residency at Liverpool's Olympia venue as part of his sold-out UK tour, and he's on top of the world as we hurtle towards the release date.

"When it came to the second album I'd felt like I'd moved into the industry on my own two feet. I didn't have anything to prove or people to win over anymore."

Where the debut album *We Get By* was a sound straight off the terraces driven by an acoustic guitar and a big heart, the second is what Jamie calls a "growing-up" record.

"I was surrounded by all these great musicians and producers. We went to the legendary Rockfield Studios [in South Wales] to record, it was a dream-come-true stepping into the shadows of the greats who'd been there before. I wanted to use everything at my disposal. There was no point doing it in half-measures."

He looked to the greats of the game when writing the album. "Lockdown was a time for everyone to find new music. I dug deep on the likes of Talking Heads, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, Credence Clearwater Revival, The Grateful Dead, The Carpenters and Paul Simon. All of these people are massive songwriters. When you're taking that influence in and then writing music, it's only going to come out more accomplished."

Despite the weighty influences and tools to hand, it's still the Jamie Webster we know and love. *Moments* builds on the themes of working-class life heard on the debut, amplifying the message and evolving the formula musically.





Lockdown was a time to find new music and I dug deep from some massive songwriters when I was recording the new album

I've had the time of my life making it and I'll have the time of my life touring it next year



"It wouldn't work if I walked out with a pair of shades on, spraying champagne all over the front row. People would see right through it, especially in this city. That's not what people know me for and that's not who I am."

Jamie makes it clear he won't forget his roots with Liverpool FC either. "I owe everything to those fans who have been there from the start with me. I genuinely wouldn't be here without them.

"I started playing my own material at the BOSS Nights and some of the pubs around the ground in the early days and people loved them. That gave me the confidence and the belief to do it. I know a huge chunk of my fanbase is the Liverpool fans and it always will be."

Given that *We Get By* made it to the top ten in the UK album charts, it's no wonder Jamie and his label Modern Sky are daring to dream big for the follow-up. "I think the record is worthy of a number one. You don't get that because it's good, though – you get it because people buy your album.

"To get two top-ten albums on an independent label would be a colossal achievement. If the fire catches in the right way, I do have a vision of myself standing there with a number one plaque. It will be very hard to do, but you've got to dream big. If you don't, you won't get it. I've got the confidence and if one thing's for certain it's that I'm up for the fight."

What would such an achievement mean to the city of Liverpool? "It would be unbelievable because I don't think someone born in the city has had a number one for a very long time now. It would mean everything to my family and friends. But for me as a musician, it would change my life. It would open so many doors, so I'd urge anyone reading to buy the album.

"I've had the time of my life making it and I'll have the time of my life touring it next year."

It's only set to get bigger and better as Jamie enters the new year, with shows lined up in New York City as well as a homecoming of epic proportions at the Liverpool Arena. "I still don't believe it's happening, but it is because we've already sold half the tickets. It's so surreal to be playing there.

"Hopefully it will be full with me on the stage singing my heart out. It will be an incredibly special way to round off this chapter of Jamie Webster."



Words: Rhys Buchanan • Olympia performance images: Dan Hewitson

Interview: Chris McLoughlin



NEW YEAR NEW GOALS

Neco Williams hopes 2022 will bring him more game-time, more assists for his Liverpool team-mates, and more productive World Cup action with Wales

Neco Williams is hoping to play against Austria for Wales in March, but for a few hours last month he thought he'd be going there in February.

UEFA's draw for the last 16 of the Champions League paired Liverpool with RB Salzburg, the Austrian side the Reds faced in the group stage in 2019. The players saw the draw before training and it was the talk of the AXA Training Centre, but then came news from Nyon of a gremlin in the works.

A 'technical error' meant that Manchester United were initially drawn against Villarreal – which they couldn't be, having played each other in the group – and were then left out of the pot to face Atletico Madrid, a pleasure nobody would wish to deny them.

As a result, the draw was declared void and ex-Arsenal midfielder Andrey Arshavin, representing final venue Saint Petersburg, was recalled to the stage to do a re-draw. This time the Reds were paired with Internazionale.

News that an Alpine excursion was off and a return to Lombardy was on, came as quite a surprise to Liverpool's players when they heard. But either way it was going to be a clash against defending champions and league leaders.

"It was a strange one, how they had to re-do the draw," laughs Neco Williams as we chat on WhatsApp with face-to-face interviews again suspended due to the grim spectre of coronavirus.

"We all thought we had Salzburg then next minute we heard it was back to the San Siro to play Inter instead.

"To be honest, we knew that whoever we got it was going to be a tough game because obviously it's the Champions League and the 16 teams left in it are all world-class.

"So we always knew it was going to be a tough game, but we've been to the San Siro this season and like we did against AC Milan we'll go there with a game-plan and try to execute it.

"Hopefully we can do what we do best and get a good result to take back to Anfield for the second leg."

It is the third time that Kopites will be singing 'Bring on yer Internazionale' ahead of I Nerazzurri running out at Anfield, but the first time Liverpool have been at home for the second leg.

In 1964/65 the Bill Shankly boys beat Inter 3-1 at a raucous Anfield in the European Cup semi-final first leg. But in the second





leg the San Siro also turned up the volume and Liverpool were beaten 3-0 with Inter scoring two controversial early goals in the space of two minutes.

It was 2007/08 when the Reds returned to Stadio Giuseppe Meazza to play Inter again in the last 16 of the Champions League. They won 1-0, Fernando Torres firing home on the turn from Fabio Aurelio's pass, after a 2-0 first-leg success on Merseyside.

Forward Dirk Kuyt recalled: "At Anfield we just tried desperately not to concede because an away-goal was such a tie-swinging scenario.

"I scored in the 85th minute that night, really late in the game, considering Marco Materazzi was sent off for them in the first half. We were just really patient in trying to score. Our thought-process was: okay, we can score one but we have to make sure we don't concede.

"We would have felt much more confident with a 1-0 win than a 2-1 win. Anyway, Stevie [Gerrard] scored an absolute cracker to make it 2-0 three minutes after my opener, but keeping the clean-sheet was more important in our minds."

The away-goals rule has now been scrapped to create a different dynamic in the knockout stages, but the Reds won't hold any fears about going to the San Siro having already won there this season.

The 2-1 group-stage win there against AC Milan was a huge confidence-booster on a night when the hosts had to win and Jürgen Klopp rotated his team to give the likes of Neco, Nat Phillips, Tyler Morton, Conor Bradley and Max Woltman an opportunity to play in one of world football's cathedrals.

"The San Siro is a massive, historic stadium and not many people can say they've played there, so it was quite nice to play against AC Milan," says Williams.





We knew that whoever we got, it was going to be a tough game because obviously it's the Champions League and the sixteen teams left in it are all world-class. So we always knew it was going to be a tough game against Inter, but we've been to the San Siro this season and like we did against AC Milan we'll go there with a game-plan and try to execute it

"They've got some great fans and it was a loud stadium. I imagine it'll be the same when we play Inter, but I'd still say Anfield is a bit louder!

"It was a great experience for me to play and win there, but also for the younger lads like Tyler Morton and the two who made their Champions League debuts.

"Max Woltman and Conor Bradley will remember that day for the rest of their lives. It was a proud day for them but special for us all who have come through the Academy.

"It was also a proud day for the likes of Alex Inglethorpe, Barry Lewtas and all the Academy staff who have worked with us."

Around 6,000 Kopites travelled to watch Liverpool play Inter in 2008 although the Reds only received around 3,500 tickets for the AC Milan game at the San Siro in December.

How many, if any, supporters will be allowed inside the ground in February is anyone's guess given the ongoing pandemic, but for many fans the San Siro is a bucket-list stadium alongside Camp Nou, the Bernabeu, Allianz Arena, Westfalenstadion, Anfield, La Bombonera and others.

But what about players? Does Neco Williams have a list of stadiums he wants to be able to say he's played in during his career?

"Kind of," he replies. "A lot of footballers are like that, but with me it's more about playing against certain players. I just want to play against the best in the world – the likes of Ronaldo, Messi, Neymar.

"I want to play against the best players, but I also know for some players it's more about wanting to play in the best stadiums in the world like the San Siro.

"It depends who you are, but for me I want to play against the best players because that will improve me as a player. If I'm playing against the best it will make me better and the best players are in the Champions League."

The best players will also be at the World Cup finals and 2022 happens to be a World Cup year, albeit one with a difference.

Qatar 2022, the 22nd FIFA World Cup, kicks off on Monday 21 November with the final held in Doha's Lusail Iconic Stadium on Sunday 18 November.

If you've not yet looked at the schedule, the group stage is played over a 12-day period with four games a day kicking off at 10am, 1pm, 4pm and 7pm GMT. And if you're reading this in Australia, you're in for even more late nights watching the footy.

At the time of writing, 13 of the 32 nations – including Brazil (Alisson, Fabinho and Bobby Firmino), Belgium (Divock Origi), England (Jordan Henderson, Trent Alexander-Arnold and maybe others), Netherlands (Virgil van Dijk) and Spain (Thiago) – have qualified. But plenty of Liverpool players will go into the new year with qualification still at stake. Williams is one of them.

Capped 17 times by Wales despite only being aged 20, he has become a key player under Robert Page's management, often playing on the left.

He played for Cymru at the delayed Euro 2020 last summer. "It's always a dream-come-true to play in a major tournament and not many people can say they've played in the Euros for Wales."

In March things will start to get nervy from Conwy to Chepstow, Flint to Ffos Las.

Wales face Austria in a World Cup play-off in the Cardiff City Stadium on 24 March. Win that and they will earn another home game against Scotland or Ukraine five days later with the winner heading to Qatar next November.

Wrexham-born Williams is well-versed in the Liverpool way







of only looking at the next game in front of him, but that hasn't stopped a thought or two about what may lie ahead when international football resumes.

"They will be two massive games for us in Wales, but we have the belief and the confidence in the team that we can win both games.

"We know it is going to be hard in the first game against Austria, but we have never been this close before to getting to a World Cup. If we do, it will be a massive achievement and I've been saying to Robbo that I hope we get Scotland in the play-off final game at the Cardiff City Stadium."

As you may guess, the captain of Scotland isn't the shyest around the AXA Training Centre at lauding the Tartan Army whenever the opportunity arrives, but for now Andy Robertson has been playing the international banter with a straight bat.

"Robbo said it's a bit too early to start biting at me saying we want to play them," laughs Neco, "but whoever goes through it is going to be a massive achievement.

"If we get to that game and we play Scotland the atmosphere will be absolutely rocking in Cardiff. What a game that would be and hopefully that's what it will come down to.

"Whoever we play, we have the confidence that we can qualify for the World Cup."

Aside from the Champions League and the World Cup there are also domestic matters to concentrate on and with such a

Every time I play the main focus for me, when we've got the ball, is getting assists. The way full-backs have developed in the last few years, especially at Liverpool, it is all about trying to get as many assists as we can

crowded fixture schedule Neco is hoping to get more game-time in 2022.

He made 11 appearances during season 2019/20, 14 appearances during season 2020/21 and Liverpool's 2-1 win against AC Milan in the San Siro was the 30th time the Academy graduate has played first-team football for the Reds.

He has contributed four official assists during those games – six if you include the two own-goals Shrewsbury Town scored from his crosses in the 2020 FA Cup – and is well-aware that with Trent Alexander-Arnold to compete with at right-back, his job when he plays is to create goals for Liverpool.

"New year is a time to set goals and see if you can succeed in achieving them," he says. "For me that is playing games, doing well and trying to contribute assists when I'm playing.

"Every time I play the main focus for me, when we've got the ball, is getting assists. The way full-backs have developed in the last few years, especially at Liverpool, it is all about trying to get as many assists as we can.

"We are all trying to help Liverpool score goals, win games and do everything we can to get three points whenever we play in the Premier League."



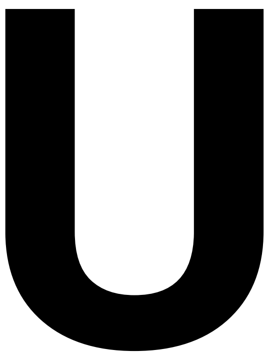
PLAYER OF THE 70s

That was one of many accolades bestowed upon Ray Kennedy, and the following is a rare interview from the archives with one of the finest players to wear the red jersey of Liverpool FC





Words: David Cottrell



pon his diagnosis with a particularly cruel condition when his playing days were over, Reds legend Ray Kennedy rarely if ever gave interviews. In the late Nineties, however, he made an exception for the monthly football magazine *Goal*. This is how it went…

Some rose-tinted time in the mid-1970s Liverpool landed at an anonymous foreign airport for the away leg of a European tie. In what was to become time-honoured fashion, they had meticulously prepared for the trip, chartering an Aer Lingus flight from Dublin.

As the party retrieved their luggage, their new signing, versed in European away travel etiquette from his previous days with Arsenal, picked up his bag, squared his shoulders and strode forward. Tentatively taking their cue, LFC's pin-striped delegation of directors smoothed back their Brylcreemed hair, adjusted their club ties and followed.

Beset by mirth, Ray Kennedy can hardly get his words out. "I went straight into the toilets, put my bag down, turned round…and they were all standing behind me."

Now 45, and ten years after he was diagnosed as suffering from Parkinson's disease, the man proclaimed as player of the decade in the BBC's *Match of the 70s* ("I was watching it at my girlfriend's house and I was shouting, 'Come in here quick – listen to this!'") retains a twinkle in his eye and a smile to match that of Muhammed



"I should do this more often"

Ali, with whom he poses in a framed photography on display next to a Christmas card from Arsenal, at his home in New Hartley, near Newcastle.

In the 1990s he became as famous for the purgatorial condition he shared with Ali as for his starry career. Middle-age dealt him the cruellest of cards. While other old team-mates remained in the game, the graceful midfielder with the middleweight boxer's build and dark Irish good looks was hounded into retirement by an illness which was identified in November 1986 but whose earliest symptoms were manifest at the height of his playing prowess.

Now virtually housebound, he has learnt to cope, and those who

know him have learnt to understand. He doesn't give interviews as a rule – "I get approached once in a while but I find that I go shy" – but says that talking like this, about football, "takes my mind off things. I should do this more often."

The public interest generated by a benefit match at Highbury in 1991 and the publication of an exceptional biography in 1993 may have subsided, but Kennedy continues to live with Parkinson's disease. Affecting one in every 100 people over the age of 65 in the UK, it is caused by the loss of a group of nerve cells in the brain which produce the hormone called dopamine which in turn regulates movement and coordination.

The symptoms include muscle rigidity and spasm, shaking, slurring of speech, mood swings, tiredness and a sense of being trapped inside the body. It's neither hereditary nor contagious. As yet there is no cure, but it can be contained. L-Dopa, a synthetic amino acid pioneered in tablet form in the early 70s, is converted within the brain to dopamine, the missing chemical culprit, and relieves the symptoms, much like insulin injections combat diabetes.

When the capsules kick in, Ray describes the process as "switching on" or "coming back." He says that people prefer him when he's like this because he's calmer and easier to understand. "But it's horrible, being slow – you look better but you don't feel it."

It is an arbitrary and fickle disease. Kennedy is diagnosed as having Parkinson's in his right side, but as well as experiencing tremors of the right hand, a sensation he makes light of – "It can be a nightmare at teatime, anyone want peas?" – he also suffers from cramp in his left leg.

"It's more frustrating than anything. Ten years...it wears you down, it takes the edge off you. I woke up this morning at about eleven – I sleep heavy, I wake every few hours through the night to take the medication – and thought: I'm okay. Then my foot cramps and I can't walk and I'm stuck in the bedroom for another hour.

"It changes all the time. I can get up in the morning, do the same things I've done today, and it wouldn't be the same. You can't get into a pattern or routine. I wish there was one pill I could take for the whole day, that wouldn't be so bad. But it's with you all the time, you never get a break."

With four minutes left on the clock, Ray Kennedy headed in off the underside of the bar at a heaving White Hart Lane to complete the first leg of Arsenal's historic League-and-FA-Cup double in 1971. It was his 'hoof' forward which enabled David Fairclough to fire Liverpool past St Etienne in an unforgettable European Cup quarter-final tie in 1977. And it was his clinically-taken goal, nine minutes from time, which settled a titanic semi-final against Bayern Munich in the same competition in 1981.

> "People would say I was lazy – which I was – but I could read where the ball was going to go, so what was the point of running for it? I wasn't the best, or the fastest, but I thought a good game"



How real is this last moment in the mind's eye, played out before a vast crowd on a fluorescent green pitch to the crackle-and-buzz of faraway commentary, and remembered on a cold, quiet Friday afternoon in the living room of a bungalow in a small village in the North East.

In the beginning, there was Arsenal. "The best club in the world," says Kennedy. "Liverpool were a better team in my eyes, but Arsenal do everything right."

The Pembury Hotel is still standing on Seven Sisters Road, North London, albeit with a prefix 'New' attached. It was here that the 16-year-old Kennedy and two other apprentices were housed in the spring of 1967.

On the train from Newcastle to King's Cross he'd stood all the way. "I wouldn't sit in a compartment, I was in a nervous panic. I got to Highbury and thought: what am I doing here? I remember walking in and seeing the famous marble halls. Me with my Geordie accent."

Earlier that year he'd been released by Port Vale. His parents knew before he did. "I hardly know how to begin his letter as I know you'll be so disappointed," wrote Vale boss Stanley Matthews, "but the fact is my staff and I now feel that Raymond will have difficult in making the grade in football to take it up as a career. He is sluggish in his movements by his natural build and it is only fair too let you know I consider he'll be wasting his time here when he could be finding alternative employment. I'm duty-bound to give you the facts so you may decide your son's future."

He returned to Seaton Delaval, the pit village three miles from his current home, to work as a trainee sugar-boiler in a sweet factory. Two Arsenal scouts spotted him playing upfront for New Hartley Juniors alongside a goal-machine called Ian Watts who had played for England Schoolboys. "Ian scored 86 goals in a season for us. But the scouts wanted to talk to me. They said, 'He scores them, but you're making them'. I still see Ian now. It didn't work out for him, but he was a good player."

Kennedy, the shy son of a miner, was the antithesis of Charlie George, a fellow apprentice who broke into the first team at the same time and became a North Bank idol. Ray was respected rather than revered.

Throughout his career, his languid, almost Brazilian gait and effortless finishing remained rare in English football. "People would say I was lazy



– which I was – but I could read where the ball was going to go, so what was the point of running for it? I wasn't the best, or the fastest, but I thought a good game." It took time. He maintains that he "didn't understand football" until he was converted to midfield at Liverpool, ten years into his professional career.

Ryan Giggs was 20 when he won the Double. Kennedy was 19. By 1974 he had become disillusioned at Arsenal, telling the press, "I've lost my way and can't get going." His transfer to Liverpool, on the same day that Bill Shankly resigned, received scant publicity, but it heralded a new direction in Kennedy's career and a new, fantastically successful era at Anfield.

Kennedy, Case, Souness and McDermott were arguably English football's greatest-ever midfield. Kennedy had been used to playing with his back to goal. Now his 5ft 11in, 13-stone frame was unmarked. He scored 72 goals in 389 appearances for Liverpool, often ghosting into the penalty area on the blind side to connect with instinctive, diagonal passes from his fellow midfielders. The goals shown on *Match of the 70s* rekindled fond memories. "It was brilliant. You didn't know you'd win, but you felt you would. You felt strong. Before the game I'd think: we'll win 2-0 today.



"It was brilliant being in that Liverpool team. You didn't know you'd win, but you felt you would. You felt strong. Before the game I'd think: we'll win 2-0 today"

"Terry McDermott would go down the right and I'd go down the left, and if I got to the far-post Terry would see it and just put the ball over. I used to get loads of goals from Terry. You had to take your time to get there. If you got there too early, the ball wouldn't come. It'd come in the end. I'd just pull it down and shoot. I used to do it for Terry on the other side, just put it in at the far-post and he'd be there.

"Jimmy and Terry shared the right. It was just me on the left. I had Alan Kennedy playing with me. You'd go long and he'd hit it short. I used to tease him and say, 'Alan, you took five years off my career'. When people asked which Kennedy I was, Alan or Ray, I'd say, 'I'm the intelligent one!'"

Kennedy found a soulmate and a friend for life at Liverpool. Jimmy Case, the local lad made good, was similarly diffident in public and dangerous after a few drinks. The pair roomed and wreaked havoc together for seven years. Graeme Souness described it as the closest friendship he'd witnessed in football.

Kennedy grins. "Fines, court appearances, jail…we were bad for each other. We had a bit of fun, but we did it at the right time. At hotels, when we asked for the room key, the receptionist would dive under the desk and say, 'Not youse two!' Everyone has a pal, but Jim and I went deeper than that. If something went wrong, one of us sorted it out. It was a good friendship."

Case, famously, is deaf in one ear. "He made sure when we roomed

together he always slept with his deaf ear turned towards me so I couldn't talk to him and he could get some sleep."

Though their paths diverged in 1981 when Case joined Brighton and Kennedy signed for Swansea City, they have remained in touch. "He was upset when I was first diagnosed. He never said anything, but I could tell by his voice. He came to see me in hospital when I was in London. He travelled from Southampton on the train because he'd been banned from driving. He cares."

Another confidante is Dr Andrew Lees, his biographer and the consultant neurologist who helped him to face the world in the harrowing early years after his condition was identified. The diagnosis was shattering, but it explained the onset of physical disability and uncontrollable mood-swings which characterised his end-of-career coaching spells in Cyprus and with Hartlepool and Sunderland, and an unhappy time running a pub.

Initially he was prescribed with a course of injections in the top of his leg. "It switched me on straightaway. Shoosh! I didn't like that at all. When I had the pub, I'd go upstairs, inject myself, come flying out, and I just felt normal. People would see us and go, 'Bloody hell!'

"I was a proud person. The first two years, I couldn't cope. I was destroyed and didn't know what to do. I just shut myself away. I was embarrassed. I wouldn't want people to see me shaking… I still feel a bit like that."

Ray's friendship with Dr Lees, who was also a Liverpool fan, grew and they remained in contact. "He keeps an eye on me. If anything goes wrong, I can ring him. A specialist doesn't have to do that."

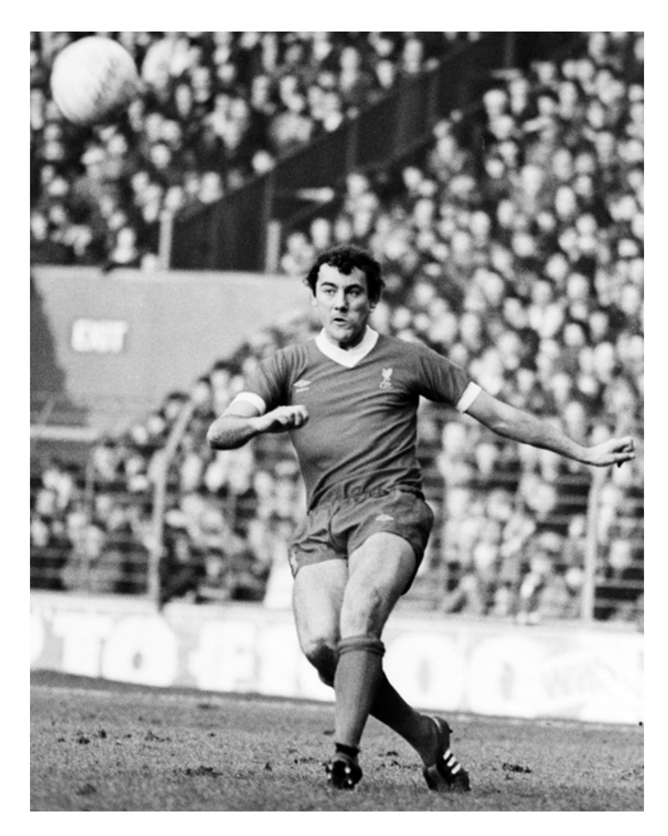
Kennedy had always resisted the idea of a biography but one day, while in hospital, he asked Lees to write a book. "I didn't want just a football story. I wanted more. He said he'd only do it if I told the truth."

The result was *Ray of Hope*, both a history of English professional football in the 1950s, 60s and 70s and a clinical but human account of, as Lees writes in his introduction, "a man and a friend trying to face life as an invalid.

"In Ray's mind," he continues, "the emergence of Parkinson's disease provided the justification of this book and explains his choice







of biographer. While many of his contemporaries navigate the stormy seas of football management, Ray daily confronts an even fiercer adversary. He has been reborn as a hero of the people, but his fans are no longer chanting on the North Bank or the Kop; instead they are the thousands of people battling against Parkinson's disease to whom his courage and unshakeable optimism have given renewed hope and inspiration."

The last decade has been one of a new kind of fame. Apart from a commemorative butter dish presented to him by Arsenal in 1972, and a portrait of a Liverpool team parading yet another trophy around Anfield at the end of some extraordinary season, there are few signs about the Kennedy household of a footballing career.

His collection of medals, including five League championships and three European Cups, went under auction in 1993. The PFA, to their credit, snapped up the lion's share.

"I don't want people to think that I'm struggling," he says. "I get bored a little bit, but I'm okay. The hardest part is not being able to do things, being active, that's all. I can't go to places I want to go. I can't go and watch my son playing football on Sunday mornings."

Though he can no longer travel to London, he remains actively involved with the Parkinson's Disease Society, which is how he met Muhammed Ali. "See the sweat around my collar? I was so nervous before meeting him. He said, 'You're a big fella – do you box?' I just said, 'No, but I've heard *you* do!' He had a shiny glow around him."

In the minds of a generation of football fans, a similar eulogy could be applied to the Player of the 70s. Ray Kennedy would be overwhelmed.



GET WITH THE PROGRAMME



It's a colossal, metatarsal-crushing, limited-edition paean to Liverpool FC matchday programmes, and it's been a labour of love for Reds fan Andy Marsden



There are lots of Liverpool supporters who buy the official matchday programme because it's full of everything they need to know ahead of kick-off. There are many others who simply want a souvenir from their visit to Anfield, or because of a fan-page dedication for someone special inside.

Then there are people like Andy Marsden, for whom a lifelong devotion has resulted in possibly the biggest LFC book ever – the definitive almanac for the casual or dedicated programme aficionado.

Andy explained why, when and how in a guest column in (you've guessed it) one of this season's matchday programmes.

"For as long as I can remember," he wrote, "a huge part of my life has revolved around Liverpool FC and programme collecting.

"It was thanks to my dad that I became a Red. I was born in Liverpool on the morning of an FA Cup final and a few years later he also gave me my first football programme, from the 1971 final against Arsenal.

"Then in 1973 I was lucky enough to attend my first home match. It was against Leeds United, and Peter Cormack and Kevin Keegan both scored. At the end of the match the Leeds players applauded the Reds off the pitch and I assumed that was what always happened.

"That was also when I got my first copy of 'The Anfield Review' [the old matchday programme]. In those days it cost five pence, there were 16 pages plus a 24-page 'League Football' insert. I was hooked. It was the start of my programme collecting.

"I look back at that programme from time to time and the memories come flooding back: I was in the old Main Stand and can remember the sights and sounds, the Kop flooding forward when Keegan scored, how big everything seemed. That's the thing with programmes – they are a portal to the past, a piece of affordable history that anyone can own."

Andy continued: "I've been very lucky to have seen the sides shaped by Shankly, Paisley, Fagan and Dalglish, and much later by Houllier, Benitez and Klopp.

"I've followed Liverpool all over the world: Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the United States. Everywhere I go, I try to get a programme – and now my attic and my office are full of memories.

"A lot of people who collect things are 'completists' – they want to have a complete set of whatever it is they collect. For many years I wondered how that would be possible with programmes – especially with ones from before when I was born.

"Who is still around to confirm whether a programme was issued for the postponed match at home to Rotherham in 1957, or the away league game at Preston in 1946? I wanted to find out and decided to create a complete catalogue of every first-team programme from the end of World War II on.

"As daunting as that challenge seemed, it soon became addictive and my initial catalogue has developed into a social history of LFC., its people and stories, told through the lens of the matchday programme. It starts with the 1945/46 season and closes with Liverpool becoming Premier League Champions in 2020.

"The 75 seasons are broken up into individual chapters. There is a colour reproduction of the cover of every programme and a write-up of every season with quotes and anecdotes from some of the programmes; also a featured issue, sections on FA Cup final variants and each of the European Cup/Champions League victories, and tips on recognising reproductions and 'alternative' versions.

"After a few aborted attempts to bring the book to fruition, I turned to fellow Reds Michael Adams, who agreed to be editor, and Andy Cothliff, the designer. Together we turned all the work and research into a book we could be proud of. Not even a global pandemic could stop us.

"The result is possibly the biggest book ever to be written about the club. Covering almost 5,000 matches, there are 984 pages and more than 6,500 images. It has been a five-year labour of love. I'm not sure if anything has been attempted on this scale before, by any club.

"It gives you a brand-new perspective on the matchday programme and our club, and all profits will be donated to the LFC Foundation."



• Liverpool Football Programmes: The Definitive Collector's Guide was published in December 2021. Check out @LFCProgMan on Twitter or visit lfcprogman.com.



Interview: William Hughes



A GOOD PLACE

Women's manager Matt Beard is not – repeat, not – getting carried away, but the potential is there for this Liverpool squad to achieve great things

MATT, YOU ENDED 2021 TOP OF THE FA WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP AND ALSO WON YOUR QUALIFYING GROUP IN THE CONTINENTAL LEAGUE CUP, ENDING THE YEAR UNBEATEN IN 14 MATCHES – YOU MUST BE VERY HAPPY?
Our priority was to be top three come Christmas and we were top of the tree, and also to get through the group in the Continental Cup and we've done that. So overall I'm delighted, yes.

I said to the players after the Sunderland Conti Cup game [the last of 2021] that if you look at the changes we've gone through as a football club they've done really well. We had two managers in the first six months of the year and changes with staff and different personnel. Every single person has stepped up to the plate and I'm talking about players and staff. It's great to see and from my perspective I'm really pleased with where we are just now.

Of course, we know we've got a lot of work to do. At the start of the season we were not quite where we are now, but the potential of this group is amazing and I'm looking forward to seeing what the second half of the season brings.

THE TEAM HAS ALSO BEEN UNBEATEN AWAY FROM HOME IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE SEASON WHICH MUST ALSO BE PARTICULARLY PLEASING?
Yes, definitely. I wouldn't say it's easier playing away from home but obviously teams open up a little bit against us and we can do a little bit more. But whether we're playing at home or away, we're just in a good place.

We're all working hard and I've been really, really pleased. We've kept quite a few clean-sheets too so the players are a great group to work with.







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WE'RE NOT THE FINISHED ARTICLE AND WE'VE GOT PLENTY THAT WE STILL NEED TO IMPROVE ON AND THAT WE STILL NEED TO TWEAK, BUT THE MAIN THING IS THAT WE'VE PUT OURSELVES IN A GOOD POSITION AND IT'S ABOUT CARRYING THAT ON NOW





YOU LOST THE OPENING GAME OF THE SEASON 1-0 AT HOME TO LONDON CITY LIONESSES BUT SINCE THEN HAVE RESPONDED WITH THIS 14-GAME UNBEATEN RUN...

I said after that first game that one game wouldn't define us and since then the players have responded really well.

As I say, we're not the finished article and we've got plenty that we still need to improve on and that we still need to tweak, but the main thing is that we've put ourselves in a good position and it's about carrying that on now.

A WORD ON A COUPLE OF PLAYERS: DEFENDER MEGAN CAMPBELL MADE HER FIRST APPEARANCES IN THE LAST COUPLE OF GAMES BEFORE CHRISTMAS AFTER A LONG INJURY...

I'm buzzing for Megs. Obviously she's an experienced player and it's like a new signing for us. We've got her back at a time where her experience will definitely help. Her passing was excellent in the Continental Cup game at Sunderland and it's just great to see her out there.

She's a real credit to herself and we're especially grateful to all the medical staff who have worked so hard to get her back so soon too.

ON-LOAN GOALKEEPER KATIE STARTUP WAS RECALLED BY HER PARENT CLUB BRIGHTON LAST MONTH, SO YOU ACTED QUICKLY TO BRING IN CHARLOTTE CLARKE FROM DERBY COUNTY AND SHE MADE HER DEBUT IN THAT CONTINENTAL CUP GAME AT SUNDERLAND...

It was important that Charlotte got her debut in that game. I was really pleased with her. I thought she did really well and keeping a clean-sheet will be good for her confidence.

When we brought her in, we knew she was a player who has a lot of experience at the level below. From my perspective, she will be a great addition to the squad.

She's settled in really well. It was interesting talking to her after the Sunderland game about how welcoming everyone has been – for me that's a big thing about what we try to create. We are together and it is like a family. I know that's a bit of a cliche but we are. She'd only been here two weeks at the time and picked up on that, so that was pleasing too.

ALL THE PLAYERS TEND TO SPEAK HIGHLY OF THE STAFF YOU'VE BROUGHT IN AS WELL AS THOSE WHO WERE HERE WHEN YOU ARRIVED...

They're more important than the team itself, to be honest. From my point-of-view the most important thing is that we're all together. We've had so many ups and downs as a squad this year already and I think that's brought us together. I'm so proud of the staff and the team, they've all been brilliant.

THE BACKING FROM THE SUPPORTERS HAS BEEN GREAT TOO, HOME AND AWAY...

They've been fantastic. The atmosphere they create at away games often makes it feel like a home game for us. I love the songs for the players! It's great.

When I came back into this job, I said the one thing you could



FURNEY WINS BBC AWARD

Liverpool FC Women vice-captain Rachel Furness has been named BBC Northern Ireland Sports Personality of the Year for 2021.

The Reds midfielder played a starring role as Northern Ireland defied the odds and qualified for this summer's European Championship. In November she made history by becoming her country's all-time top goalscorer by netting twice against North Macedonia to take her tally to 38 international goals.

Furness was presented with the BBC award by Jürgen Klopp at the AXA Training Centre. The Reds boss congratulated Rachel and her national side on their achievements and spoke of how they had become "game-changers" in Northern Ireland, inspiring a whole new generation of girls to play football.

A prestigious accolade, the BBC award has been won in previous years by the likes of Rory McIlroy, Carl Frampton, David Healy and Jonathan Rea.

Furness said: "It is a fantastic moment for me to be only the second woman to ever win this award, but it isn't just about me – it is about my team. I want to dedicate this award to my team-mates in the Northern Ireland squad.

"Over the past 12 months we have achieved so much and hopefully this is just the start of something really special."



CONTINENTAL CUP GROUP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	4	1	3	3	2	1	8
Sunderland	4	1	2	1	3	9	7
Blackburn	4	2	0	2	4	4	6
Sheff Utd	4	1	2	1	3	3	5
Aston Villa	4	1	1	2	9	4	4

> SO IT'S JUST ABOUT US KEEPING OUR FEET ON THE GROUND, KEEP ON DOING WHAT WE'RE DOING, AND THEN WE GO FROM THERE

guarantee from us is that we would be committed and do all we can to win football matches. You are not going to win every game – that's just not possible in football anymore – but our fans have been great.

Even when we had a tough start at home when we lost to London City Lionesses and then drew with Bristol City at Prenton Park, they have supported us throughout.

OVERALL, THERE SEEMS TO BE A REAL FEELGOOD FACTOR BACK AROUND THE WOMEN'S TEAM...

Since I've been back, the club has been fantastic. Obviously I've been here at Liverpool before and I was at a point where I'd won everything in England and I wanted to try something different and so I decided to go to America.

Since I walked back through the door, the club has been nothing but supportive. [Executive director] Susan Black, [CEO] Billy Hogan... everyone has been brilliant.

The thing for me now is that we just need to keep our feet on the ground. We've not achieved anything yet. We had targets for the first half of the season and we hit those targets so it's now about hitting the next set of targets as we go.

I'm not going to get carried away because I know what it takes to win leagues and I know what it takes to be in and around where we are. So it's just about us keeping our feet on the ground, keep on doing what we're doing, and then we go from there.



FA WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP (as at 31 December 2021)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Gd	Pts
Liverpool	10	7	2	1	16	5	11	23
Durham	11	7	0	4	16	11	5	21
London City	10	6	1	3	12	9	3	19
Crystal Palace	10	5	3	2	20	16	4	18
Bristol City	10	5	2	3	20	12	8	17
Charlton Ath	10	5	1	4	15	10	5	16
Lewes	10	5	1	4	14	11	3	16
Sunderland	10	3	3	4	9	12	-3	12
Sheffield Utd	10	3	2	5	11	14	-3	11
Blackburn	11	3	1	7	11	18	-7	10
Coventry Utd	11	1	3	7	11	23	-12	6
Watford	11	1	3	7	11	25	-14	6

WE'LL DRINK A CUP OF KINDNESS YET

Words: Chris McLoughlin

Rush scored one, Rush scored two, Rush scored three and Rush scored four and that famous 5-0 win in 1982 was the last time the Reds had scored four or more in a league game against Everton at Goodison Park until 2021.

The ever-decreasing-in-size piece of chocolate behind the advent calendar door tasted even better on the morning of 2 December as the night before, Liverpool won the Merseyside derby 4-1.

Salah scoring, all around me, Kopites singing, having fun… It could have been more than four, too, but then Evertonians always used to say Rafa Benitez is a lucky manager.

Banter aside, Rafa being in charge of Everton will never not be weird. He's a Liverpool legend and always will be, but as long as he manages the Blues he is also a rival and Jürgen Klopp's boys showed no sentiment.

Jordan Henderson curled home the first goal with his left foot in the ninth minute, but it could've been Liverpool's fourth. Joel Matip headed a sitter wide, Mo Salah nudged a cross over from close-range and saw another effort saved by the outstretched arm of Jordan Pickford.

So when Hendo found the net, from Andy Robertson's cross, it was more than deserved and ten minutes later the skipper sent Salah scampering through. He raced forward, opened up his body and curled the ball over Pickford to remind everyone that if he is only the seventh-best player in the world (which according to the Ballon d'Or vote he is) then the other six must be so good they can probably head in their own corners.

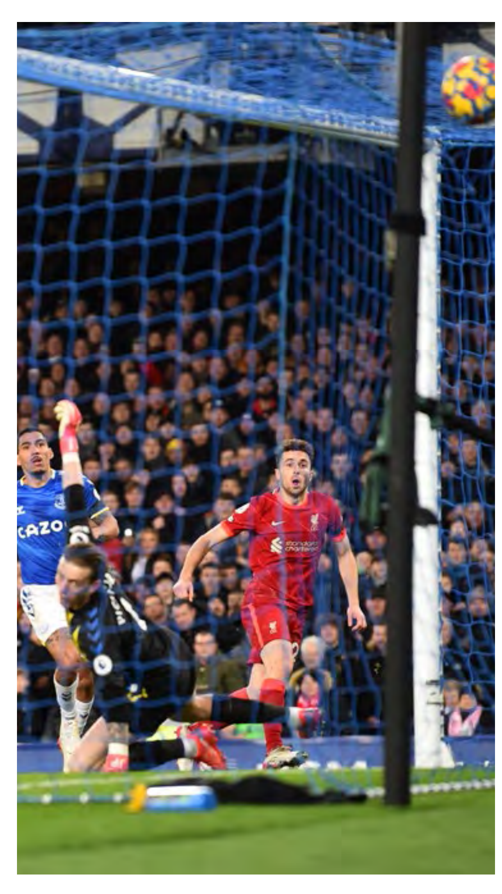
Some of the home crowd headed home before the Blues got a goal back through Demarai Gray after a bit of a lull from the Reds, but Liverpool were flying again in the second half.

Salah took advantage of a Seamus Coleman miskick on the halfway-line to run half the length of the field and roll a low shot across Pickford into the bottom corner for his 19th goal of the season – one goal less than Sheffield United managed during the entire 2020/21 campaign.

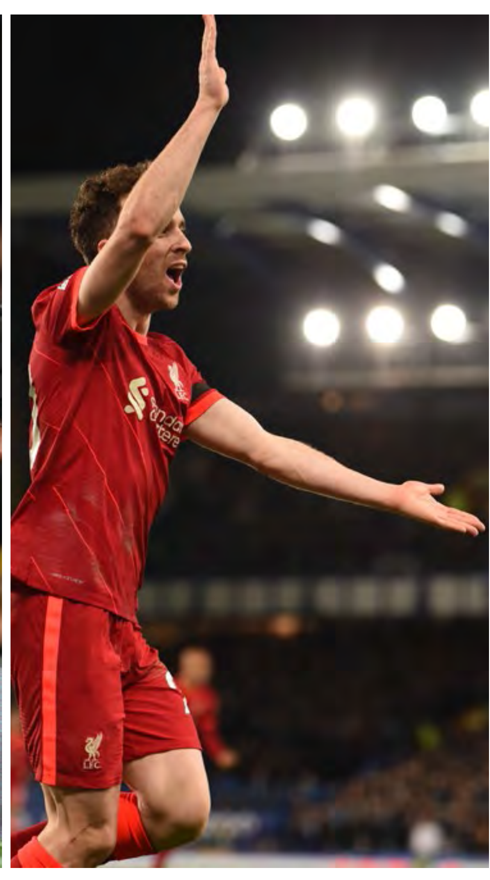
Diogo Jota then scored a cracker to make it 4-1, turning away from Allan and lashing the Reds' fourth left-footed goal of the night into the roof of the net before celebrating in front of the travelling Kop by mimicking a crocodile with his arms. Quite why is unclear, but that goal is now part of an emerging new Jota song to the old 'Torres bounce'. And about time too.

"I liked what I saw and it was by far the best performance









we've done at Goodison," said Klopp. "We made a big step in our development that we can take [on] these kinds of games, even though they are really important for the opponent, and we can put emotions to the side."

A few days later, the boss spoke for the first time about why legendary Brazilian goalkeeper Claudio Taffarel – 'Taffa' as he calls him – has been appointed by Liverpool as goalkeeping coach.

"We want to create our own goalkeeping philosophy. For that, we thought it makes sense to mix it up with a coach who was a world-class player, obviously, and works in the moment together with two of the best goalies in the world: Ederson and Alisson [for Brazil].

"So we spoke to Ali and he was quite pleased about that, then we spoke to Taffa and he loved the idea as well and here we go. It's really good and exciting. He is a brilliant guy and he's older than me, which is important because I was the oldest in the coaching staff!

"John Achterberg renewed his contract, by the way, until 2024. Because people very often make the wrong conclusions because of some things. John is the head of the goalie department and Taffa is a wonderful add-on to that."

Hopefully Taffa doesn't mind the cold as it wasn't exactly like the Copacabana in Wolverhampton a few days later when the Reds travelled to Molineux for a tricky looking Premier League match.







Under the management of Bruno Lage, keeping the Wolves from the door has become slightly easier, but trying to score against their packed defence is much harder. Unless you're Divock Origi making your 100th substitute appearance for Liverpol.

For all the world it l0-0ked like one of those days, especially when birthday boy Jota went past Wolves keeper Jose Sa – after he raced out and missed the ball – and from just six yards out, with the entire goal to aim at, hit Conor Coady on the line.

It was a mad miss from a top player, but it's no fluke that Liverpool had scored 38 stoppage-time winners – 12 more than any other club – in the Premier League before this game. They added another one to the list when Salah, who made 'Never Give Up' t-shirts fashionable a couple of years ago, controlled a diagonal pass from Virgil van Dijk, got away from ex-Red Ki-Jana Hoever and played a pass into Origi.

With his back to goal, Origi took a touch before pirouetting like a ballerina in a music box and bludgeoning a low shot past Sa to put the Reds top of the Premier League. Get in.

Is there any better feeling than a stoppage-time winner? The wild celebrations in the away end suggest not and they were matched by those on the Liverpool bench with Achterberg ending up on the pitch and Klopp jumping into his arms. He didn't even have his goalie gloves on but thankfully still caught the gaffer.

The following day LFCTV released a video of Origi's goal from every angle. Are you even a Red if you didn't watch it on a loop for 24 hours? Although there was an FA Cup third-round draw to tune in for, on the Monday night.

Liverpool, ball number 23, were drawn out to play at home by ex-Arsenal Ladies captain Faye White before a chuckling David Seaman paired us with Shrewsbury Town for the second time in three seasons.

Significantly, 6 December was also the day when Liverpool FC launched a new Supporters Board "that represents the club's diverse fanbase" and "will hold regular meetings with the club."

The statement continued: "The make-up of the Board will consist of 10 Spirit of Shankly committee members, plus six other representatives drawn from other fan organisations, including Liverpool Disabled Supporters Association, Kop Outs, Spion Kop 1906, Official Liverpool Supporters Clubs, Liverpool Women's Supporters Committee, and faith and ethnic groups."

As Spirit of Shankly put it, "This is a groundbreaking move for supporter involvement at both local and national level. It will be written into the club's Articles of Association allowing for improved engagement now, but most importantly, protecting it for the future."

On the pitch, Liverpool broke new ground – kind of – in Italy when they visited AC Milan for the first time. The Reds had already beaten Internazionale in the San Siro back in 2008 and even though Klopp's men had already qualified as group winners they fancied adding AC to the European away-wins list.

It may yet get bulldozed as a new stadium has been mooted for close-by, but there's no doubt that Stadio Giuseppe Meazza, located in Milan's San Siro district, is a cathedral of football, a genuine bucket-list job.

The home supporters didn't disappoint before kick-off. As captain for the night Alisson led out the Reds in yellow, the AC Milan ultras unveiled a giant tifo behind one of the goals. 'Sempre Con Te Saro', it read, 'I'll always be with you'.

A Milan win would send the Serie A leaders through and they went ahead through Fikayo Tomori from a corner, but not for long. Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain unleashed a shot,













Mike Maignan could only parry it and Salah was on hand to side-foot home a club-record seventh Champions League group-stage goal of the season.

Liverpool's second-half San Siro silencer wasn't dissimilar. This time it was Sadio Mane's shot that Maignan parried and Origi who got to the rebound first to head home what proved to be the winner.

But the moment of the night went to Nat Philiips, aka the 'Bolton Baresi', when he ended an AC Milan attack with a Cruyff turn between Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Franck Kessie.

"It was just instinct and thankfully it paid off," said Big Nat after going viral. "I'm looking forward to watching it back and if it is turned into a GIF I'll have to get hold of it so I can send it around!"

Unfortunately for Phillips he also fractured his cheekbone during Liverpool's historic sixth group-stage win – the first time any English club has won 6/6 – but there was better news for Trent Alexander-Arnold when he was named Standard Chartered player of the month for November.

Speaking of Scousers in our team, Steven Gerrard was back at Anfield on 11 December as manager of Aston Villa. It was even weirder than Rafa managing Everton, but kids grow up quickly these days and the 2005 European Cup-winning skipper is now leading the 1982 European champions.





Before kick-off, Anfield paid tribute to the late Ray Kennedy with another magnificent mosaic – designed and laid out by Kopite Andy Knott and friends – and a proper game of football was settled by a second-half penalty-kick.

Tyrone Mings hauled down Salah and up he got to score from the spot to give Liverpool a 100th one-nil Premier League win.

"I had to accept it was going to be emotional for me and my family," said Stevie G afterwards. "I've spent many years and given a lot of my life to this football club. For me, it was trying to control that, trying to control the outside noise and be respectful to Aston Villa. I thought our fans were terrific today. But I also respect the ovation I got and the relationship with the Liverpool fans."







Ahead of a midweek visit from Newcastle United, the Reds were drawn against RB Salzburg in the last 16 of the Champions League. The first leg will be played in Salzburg on…wait a minute.

Someone at UEFA must have fed a mogwai after midnight as gremlins got into the works causing a technical error that led to the wrong balls going in the wrong pots and Andriy Arshavin having to cut short his lunch in Nyon to do a redraw. Bring on yer Internazionale.

If Newcastle's new owners spend the money they are anticipated to spend, then Champions League football surely beckons for the Toon Army in the future, but they have to avoid relegation first and a 3-1 Anfield defeat did them no favours on that front.

The Reds went into the game without Van Dijk, Fabinho and Curtis Jones due to COVID and with just seven minutes on the clock ex-Red Jonjo Shelvey was whipping out the fake glasses again in celebration after beating Alisson from long-range.

Some players refuse to celebrate against their old clubs, but Shelvey is one of those lads who'd have a marching band following him around the perimeter of the Anfield pitch blasting out Sweet Caroline on trumpets if he could.

It's fair enough and his goal was a belter, but just like at Swansea in 2013 – when he opened the scoring for the Swans only to play Daniel Sturridge in for the equaliser with a bad back-pass – he also gave Liverpool a goal back.

PFA player of the month Jota had already equalised when Shelvey's backpass sent Mane through on goal. He was denied by Martin Dubravka, but Salah was on hand to make it 2-1 from the rebound.

A late Alexander-Arnold 25-yard rocket almost took the Kop-end net off to complete a 3-1 success and make Liverpool the first English club to record 2,000 top-flight league wins on the same night that they scored in a club-record 32nd consecutive game. When it comes to goalscoring, we've never had it so good.

Unfortunately a positive becomes a negative when COVID tests are concerned and Thiago was next to suffer, ruling him out of the trip to North London to take on Tottenham where the rapid spread of Omicron left 15,000 seats empty despite it officially being a sell-out.

They missed one of the best games of the season as the two teams fought out an enthralling yet controversial 2-2 draw. Harry Kane scored, but then wasn't sent off. Diogo Jota equalised, but then wasn't given a penalty. Andy Robertson scored, but then was sent off by VAR. Shall we move on?

Brendan Rodgers' Leicester City arrived at Anfield for a pre-Christmas Carabao Cup quarter-final and after having a couple of games postponed due to coronavirus, the ex-Reds boss wasn't shy on giving his big guns a run-out: Schmeichel, Soyoncu, Ndidi, Tielemans, Maddison and Vardy all started against a Liverpool side with Billy Koumetio, Conor Bradley and Tyler Morton in it plus Neco Williams channelling his inner-Gareth Bale to play as a forward.

So when Vardy scored two early goals and thumped the post it wasn't fall-off-your-seat-in-shock time. But when Maddison made it 3-1 before half-time, after Oxlade-Chamberlain had pulled a goal back, it felt like a long way back for the Reds.

But with Anfield in raucous form – after the visiting fans wound up Kopites with some tiresome chants that need to get in the bin – and a triple half-time substitution of Jota, Ibrahima Konate and James Milner followed by Naby Keita shortly afterwards turning the game, Liverpool weren't done-for.

Jota gotta goal back and in the 95th minute Takumi Minamino showed control and composure to equalise, leaving some Leicester players on the turf in anguish. Caoimhin Kelleher then added his name to the list of Liverpool goalies to win two penalty shoot-outs with saves







from Luke Thomas and Ryan Bertrand to send the Redmen through.

"When I made that save and I heard the crowd it was an amazing feeling, to be honest," said Ireland's greatest glove-wearer since Katie Taylor.

"It's an exhilaration throughout my body." Felt the same in the stands, Quiv.

It also proved to be Liverpool's last Anfield game of 2021 after the Boxing Day clash with Leeds was postponed due to the visitors being unable to field a team under COVID protocols. Whatever they are.

At least the Reds had enough players for the now-annual Santa hat Christmas Day photo at the AXA and Klopp penned a festive letter to us all.

"As always, I want to wish Liverpool supporters around the world a very happy and peaceful Christmas – and I hope that wherever in the world you are reading these words, you and your loved ones are safe and healthy," he wrote.

"Today, my team-talk for you is this: show those you love and care about what they mean to you, enjoy your time with them because it's precious, reach out to those who you can't be with in person using the technology we have and take a moment to remember those who've sadly left us.

"However you choose to mark today, however you choose to celebrate, I wish you and your families health, happiness, peace and love."

He wasn't able to give us the gift of three points when the Reds travelled to Leicester on 28 December – Mo missed a penalty before Ademola Lookman scored the only goal for the Foxes on an off-night for Liverpool – but is there anyone else in the world you would rather be leading our club into 2022 than Jürgen Klopp?

Didn't think so, but then not even the Liverpool manager is immune to COVID and after testing positive his team would have to go into the new year, and face a trip to Chelsea, without him...







WHAT'S ON

JAN/FEB



BEES, EAGLES, FOXES AND AFCON

Liverpool will be looking to navigate their way through the month of January without their African contingent.

Attackers Mo Salah (Egypt) and Sadio Mane (Senegal) and midfielder Naby Keita (Guinea) will be representing their countries at the Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon throughout the next month.

The trio will be missing for the home game against Brentford on Sunday 16 January 2022 when Liverpool host the Bees in league action for the first time since October 1946 when Albert Stubbins was the match-winner.

They will also be absent for the Premier League clash at Crystal Palace seven days later before returning ahead of the home game against Leicester City on Thursday 10 February.

Naby and Sadio could come face-to-face when Guinea take on Senegal in a group game at the Kouekong Stadium in Bafoussam Ko Stadium on Friday 14 January. The AFCON final is scheduled for Sunday 6 February in Yaounde.

Meanwhile, Liverpool's reward for their FA Cup third-round win over Shrewsbury Town is a date at home to Cardiff City on the opening weekend of February.



JAN/FEB

WHAT'S ON



UP FOR THE CUPS

Liverpool FC Women will be bidding to make progress in two cup competitions this month.

Matt Beard's side have reached the quarter-finals of the Continental Tyres League Cup for the first time since 2016. They will visit Women's Super League high-flyers Tottenham Hotspur on Wednesday 19 January in the last eight.

The Reds will also be bidding to book their place in the last 16 of the FA Women's Cup when they host FA Women's National League side Lincoln City at Prenton Park in a fourth-round tie on Sunday 30 January.

Why not get along and back the team?

ALL THOSE YEARS AGO...



ANNIVERSARIES

6 years since Jürgen Klopp broke his glasses at Carrow Road on 23 January 2016
25 years since Jamie Carragher scored his first LFC goal on 18 January 1997
103 years since Bob Paisley was born on 23 January 1919
14 years since Lucas scored his first goal for Liverpool on 26 January 2008
35 years since John Aldridge joined the Reds on 27 January 1987
44 years since Graeme Souness made his Reds debut on 14 January 1978

And it's 100 years since Billy Liddell was born in Townhill, Scotland on 10 January 1922…

For Liverpudlians of a certain generation, Billy Liddell remains the greatest player ever to pull on a red jersey. Such was his impact, supporters renamed the club in his honour by coining the nickname 'Liddellpool'.

The winger was born in Scotland a century ago and came to prominence amid the gloom of the 1950s when relegation from the top-flight and humiliating cup exits meant the Kop had little to smile about. The one shining light was William Beveridge Liddell.

He ensured crowds continued to flock to Anfield in their thousands and was largely responsible for keeping the club's head above the abyss of Football League oblivion.

It was Matt Busby, at the time Liverpool captain, who the Reds had to thank for tipping off scout Johnny Dougary about a precocious youngster plying his trade for Lochgelly Violet. He was a thrilling, skilful, two-footed winger – fast, direct and capable of bursting the back of any opposition net with one of his trademark thunderbolts.

A solitary league championship, won in 1946/47, was scant reward to the talent he possessed.

An accountant by trade, Liddell was never booked and captained the club with distinction. One of the finest role-models ever to play the game, he was the perfect club ambassador. A devout Christian who never drank, smoked or swore, he did a lot of work for charity and was a qualified Justice of the Peace.

On 31 August 1960 he represented the Reds first team for the final time. It was his 537th appearance for Liverpool – a record that remained until Ian Callaghan's 18-year stint in the 1960s and 70s.

He scored 228 goals, too!

BIRTHDAYS

Takumi Minamino 27 on 16 January
Alvaro Arbeloa 39 on 17 January
Peter Beardsley 61 on 18 January
Phil Thompson 68 on 21 January
Stan Collymore 51 on 22 January
Jose Enrique 36 on 23 January
Pep Lijnders 39 on 24 January
Luis Suarez 35 on 24 January
Brendan Rodgers 49 on 26 January
Jamie Carragher 44 on 28 January
Peter Crouch 41 on 30 January
Curtis Jones 21 on 30 January





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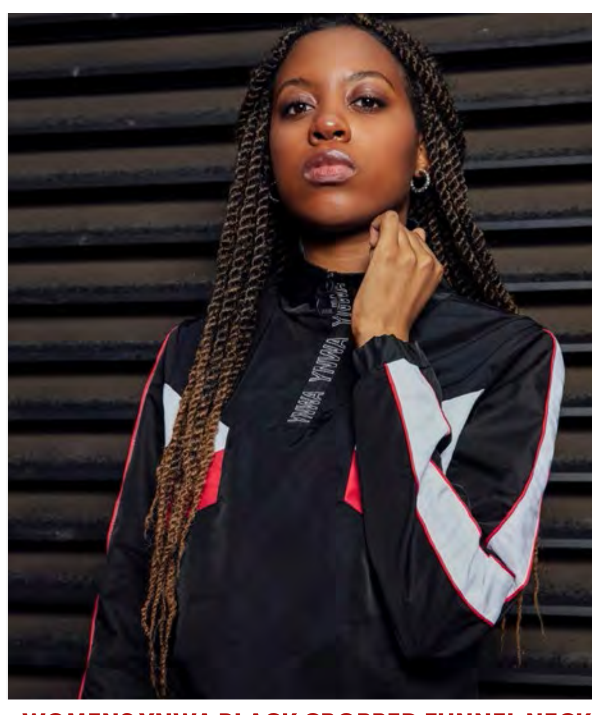
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FIXTURES 2021/22

		SCORE	TV	SCORERS
AUGUST				
Sat 14	Norwich City (A, 5.30pm)	3-0	Sky	Jota, Firmino, Salah
Sat 21	**Burnley (H, 12.30pm)**	**2-0**	**BT**	**Jota, Mane**
Sat 28	**Chelsea (H, 5.30pm)**	**1-1**	**Sky**	**Salah (pen)**
SEPTEMBER				
Sun 12	Leeds United (A, 4.30pm)	3-0	Sky	Salah, Fabinho, Mane
Wed 15	**AC Milan (H, UCL Matchday One, 8pm)**	**3-2**	**BT**	**Tomori (og), Salah, Henderson**
Sat 18	**Crystal Palace (H, 3pm)**	**3-0**		**Mane, Salah, Keita**
Tue 21	Norwich City (A, Carabao Cup 3, 7.45pm)	3-0	Sky	Minamino 2, Origi
Sat 25	Brentford (A, 5.30pm)	3-3	Sky	Jota, Salah, Jones
Tue 28	Porto (A, UCL Matchday Two, 8pm)	5-1	BT	Salah 2, Mane, Firmino 2
OCTOBER				
Sun 3	**Manchester City (H, 4.30pm)**	**2-2**	**Sky**	**Mane, Salah**
Sat 16	Watford (A, 12.30pm)	5-0	BT	Firmino 3, Mane, Salah
Tue 19	Atletico Madrid (A, UCL Matchday Three, 8pm)	3-2	BT	Salah 2 (1 pen), Keita
Sun 24	Manchester United (A, 4.30pm)	5-0	Sky	Keita, Jota, Salah 3
Wed 27	Preston North End (A, Carabao Cup 4, 7.45pm)	2-0	Sky	Minamino, Origi
Sat 30	**Brighton & Hove Albion (H, 3pm)**	**2-2**		**Henderson, Mane**
NOVEMBER				
Wed 3	**Atletico Madrid (H, UCL Matchday Four, 8pm)**	**2-0**	**BT**	**Jota, Mane**
Sun 7	West Ham United (A, 4.30pm)	2-3	Sky	Alexander-Arnold, Origi
Sat 20	**Arsenal (H, 5.30pm)**	**4-0**	**Sky**	**Mane, Jota, Salah, Minamino**
Wed 24	**Porto (H, UCL Matchday Five, 8pm)**	**2-0**	**BT**	**Thiago, Salah**
Sat 27	**Southampton (H, 3pm)**	**4-0**		**Jota 2, Thiago, van Dijk**
DECEMBER				
Wed 1	Everton (A, 8.15pm)	4-1	AP	Henderson, Salah 2, Jota
Sat 4	Wolverhampton Wanderers (A, 3pm)	1-0		Origi
Tue 7	AC Milan (A, UCL Matchday Six, 8pm)	2-1	BT	Salah, Origi
Sat 11	**Aston Villa (H, 3pm)**	**1-0**		**Salah (pen)**
Thu 16	**Newcastle United (H, 8pm)**	**3-1**	**BT**	**Jota, Salah, Alexander-Arnold**
Sun 19	Tottenham Hotspur (A, 4.30pm)	2-2	Sky	Jota, Robertson
Wed 22	**Leicester City (H, Carabao Cup 5, 7.45pm)**	**3-3***		**Oxlade-Chamberlain, Jota, Minamino**
Tue 28	Leicester City (A, 8pm)	0-1	AP	
JANUARY				
Sun 2	Chelsea (A, 4.30pm)	2-2	Sky	Mane, Salah
Sun 9	**Shrewsbury Town (H, Emirates FA Cup 3, 2pm)**	**4-1**		**Gordon, Fabinho 2 (1 pen), Firmino**
Thu 13	**Arsenal (H, Carabao Cup S-F 1, 7.45pm)**		**Sky**	
Sun 16	**Brentford (H, 2pm)**			
Thu 20	Arsenal (A, Carabao Cup S-F 2, 7.45pm)		Sky	
Sun 23	Crystal Palace (A, 2pm)		Sky	
FEBRUARY				
Sat 5	**Cardiff City (H, Emirates FA Cup 4, TBC)**			
Thu 10	**Leicester City (H, 7.45pm)**		**BT**	
Sun 13	Burnley (A, 2pm)			
Wed 16	Inter Milan (A, UCL Ro16 1, 8pm)		BT	
Sat 19	**Norwich City (H)**			
Sun 27	Carabao Cup Final			
MARCH				
Wed 2	Emirates FA Cup 5			
Sat 5	**West Ham United (H)**			
Tue 8	**Inter Milan (H, UCL Ro16 2, 8pm)**		**BT**	
Sat 12	Brighton & Hove Albion (A)			
Sat 19	**Manchester United (H)**			
Sat 19	Emirates FA Cup 6			
APRIL				
Sat 2	**Watford (H)**			
Tue 5/Wed 6	UCL Q-F 1			
Sat 9	Manchester City (A)			
Tue 12/Wed 13	UCL Q-F 2			
Sat 16	Aston Villa (A)			
Sat 16	Emirates FA Cup S-F			
Sat 23	**Everton (H)**			
Tue 26/Wed 27	UCL S-F 1			
Sat 30	Newcastle United (A)			
MAY				
Tue 3/Wed 4	UCL S-F 2			
Sat 7	**Tottenham Hotspur (H)**			
Sat 14	Emirates FA Cup Final			
Sun 15	Southampton (A)			
Sun 22	**Wolverhampton Wanderers (H)**			
Sat 28	UCL Final			
TBC	**Leeds United (H)**		**BT**	
TBC	Arsenal (A)			

All fixtures are subject to change.
*Liverpool won 5-4 on penalties (Milner, Firmino, Oxlade-Chamberlain, Keita, Jota)




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NEIL MELLOR

More than ever you need options in central defence, and this season the Reds have plenty to choose from

Ibrahima Konate has been with Liverpool for six months now and he is a player I like. He's only 22 and trying to settle into a new country and a new league, but he is doing so very well.

We've seen in the past that whoever partners Virgil van Dijk looks a better player and Konate has certainly benefited from playing alongside the best defender in the world. He's also been up against Joel Matip for a place in the team, but when he has played he's shown he can handle the Premier League.

At the time of writing, Liverpool are unbeaten in the 12 matches that Konate has played in. It's an impressive statistic considering the Reds have a real identity in the way which the manager wants his defensive line to play.

Konate will have worked hard in training to adjust to the high defensive line, but the fact that he has real speed helps.

In addition to Van Dijk, having the best goalkeeper in the world and one of the best defensive midfielders in the world around him has been a massive help, but he's also got to be able to sense danger and does so well.

Liverpool supporters will have their preferred central-defensive partnership, but the reality for Jürgen Klopp is that the days when two centre-backs play every game together are over.

We know Matip can't play 50 games-a-season and we know Joe Gomez has had some serious injuries, so Konate came to Liverpool knowing he would get game-time. It's not a case of Van Dijk and Matip starting every game so when Konate is called upon he has to be ready and he deserves a lot of credit for showing that he is.

His attitude has been spot-on and his partnership with Van Dijk has looked strong. There's a good mixture of defensive capabilities, speed, height and the ability to sense danger. Konate has those attributes and given the trouble Liverpool had at centre-back last season it is good to know we now have strength in depth.

It shouldn't be forgotten just how serious the injury was that Van Dijk suffered. The problem Virgil has is that everybody expects him to be at the level he was at before suffering the injury when the reality is that is very difficult to do.

Remarkably, Virgil has got back to that level. He still has that trademark confidence and aura about him, a fear-factor for opposition centre-forwards. They will go into games thinking 'maybe he's not the Van Dijk of old' and then come off the pitch thinking 'he's still the best in the world'.

Just having Virgil back gives everyone added confidence, but it has also helped Liverpool's attacking play. His ability to ping diagonal passes from the back is second-to-none. Liverpool's full-backs play high up the pitch and he has the ability to make spraying passes out to the flanks easy. It's hugely important in how Liverpool play.

Of course, not every centre-back can play and Gomez has had to be patient so far this season having returned from a serious injury himself.

Joe is a really well-liked personality in the dressing-room. Speak to any Liverpool player, or member of staff, and they'll tell you how lovely he is, but he's also a footballer who isn't playing regularly and wants to play.

He's been very unlucky to have two bad injuries, but let's not forget the quality that he has. Gomez made 43 appearances in all competitions during Liverpool's Premier League title-winning campaign and the club will be patient with him.



Certain football clubs pressure players to be playing – that's not the case at Liverpool. You're part of a squad where patience and being ready to perform when required is key to the manager's philosophy.

His ability to play on the right-side of a back-three and in both full-back positions adds to his value and perhaps having half-a-season to build his fitness back up will ultimately benefit him long term.

Finally, it may be that Nat Phillips moves on this month. Whether he does or not he will be a player that the supporters never forget. The contribution he and Rhys Williams made last season was crucial.

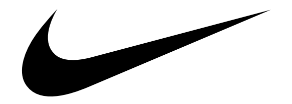
Phillips is an old-fashioned centre-half who will head or kick anything and leave the pitch with blood pouring from his head, but also a proper defender who can Cruyff-turn his way past AC Milan players in the San Siro.

While it is a shame that most of his best displays came behind-closed-doors last season, Nat Phillips will always be loved by his manager and Liverpool fans.

• Follow Neil on Twitter @NeilMellor33










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